

His Persephone

thewanderers'wanderingdaughter

Harry Potter

Complete



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This story was first published on March 27th, 2012, and was last updated on October 31st, 2013.

FicLab ID: SBRuA8lQ/ltze5l2v/5zf00C5S

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Summary

title His Persephone
author thewanderers'wanderingdaughter
source <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/7965107/>
published March 27th, 2012
updated October 31st, 2013
words 184,175
chapters 39
status Complete
rating Fiction M
tags Angst, Books, Complete, Draco M., Fanfiction, Harry Potter, Hermione G., Hermione G. & Draco M., Horror

Description:

Sequel to His Little Bird. He's waited for months while she's slipped out of his sight, but now she's back at Hogwarts, and Draco Malfoy will stop at nothing to claim his ultimate possession. Seventh year. DARK. Not book compliant. Non-con and violence. COMPLETE.

1. Safe

For any new readers, this story is the sequel and companion to my other fic, *His Little Bird*. To fully understand what will be going on in this story, I suggest you go read that first.

To my old readers, hello again, darlings. You've been waiting for this, and I've been eager to write it.

So let's not delay this any longer, shall we?

WARNING: This story will be pretty dark. Darker than *His Little Bird* was. This one will contain violence, and non-con, and *tons* of angst. If these things aren't your cup of tea, I advise you to stop reading now.

Disclaimer: I own nothing of the Harry Potter world. Nothing. Except this plot, maybe.

Now that's over with....

His Persephone

Chapter One: Safe

"You better run like the devil 'cause they're never gonna leave you alone

You better hide up in the alley 'cause they're never gonna find you a home

And as the blood runs down the walls

You see me creeping up these halls..."

House of Wolves-My Chemical Romance

The cold, eerie October night held an eerie fog that rolled mercilessly onto the densely forested school grounds, obscuring everything in its path. The never ending inky expanse of the night sky gleamed softly as the stars burned, so high up in their own worlds.

A persistent chill permeated the walls of the immense castle that stood resolutely in the center of the vast grounds, seeping into every room and into the bones of every living being inside of it. A roaring fire burned away in every dormitory, ensuring that no pupil or staff member would sleep in a miserable, cold state that night.

Indeed, all were sleeping contentedly inside their warm beds on this troubling night.

All but one.

High up on the fourth floor, tucked away inside her room in the Head dormitory, a young woman thrashed in agony on her bed.

Her beautiful pale, heart-shaped face was twisted in horror; her arms were raised up to the air in a defensive stance, as though she meant to ward off an attacker. Long, dark curls had escaped their confinement in all her frenzied movement, and were spread around her pillow, tangling in her arms. Her pink, pouting lips were open; she expelled harsh pants and curious, broken fragments of sentences that would have alarmed anyone if they could hear them.

“Get away-no!” She mumbled, shoving at an imaginary person who seemed to be trying to grab her. Heavy crimson sheets twisted around her legs as she kicked out, goosebumps erupting over her skin.

Words once spoken by the wizard who terrorized her dreams filled her head. She flinched.

“You’ll never have me,” she whispered angrily, yanking her arms back to herself.

She let out a shriek as she relived a certain memory, clutching at her arm, where a scar in the shape of an ornate M lay.

“Don’t kill him,” she whispered, a stray tear sliding down the side of her face.

All those awful memories began mixing together. Flashes of each danced in her mind like a strobe light; dizzying and horrible. A glimpse of ocean-grey eyes, staring down at her with a terrifying lust that she couldn’t comprehend, pale, long-fingered hands, roaming intrusively and unwontedly over her body, a pair of full lips crashing down onto hers, a smooth, cold voice echoing around her in the dark, following her, hunting her.

Slowly, she quieted in her slumber, her chest rising and falling rapidly but she remained still, her head turned this way and that as though she was searching for something or someone. In her nightmare, she was alone. The pitch black engulfed her, and she could not even see her own hands in front of her.

She knew he was there. She couldn’t hear him, couldn’t see him, but he was there, following her. The hairs on her arms bristled and she walked away quickly, making sure to become as silent as possible even though she had no clue as to where she was headed.

Step by step she made her way but nothing changed and the scene remained black. The dread seeped slowly from her heart the longer she walked. Still, nothing changed, and she began to worry, and looked around. How far had she gone? It was impossible to tell. She blinked, and the dread was back, pressing in on her, and frightened anew, she began to run. Faster than she’d ever run in her life, she ran, lungs burning, legs aching, heart pounding like a jack hammer inside her chest. And then she heard it. Calm, slow footsteps coming towards her and she knew it was him without a doubt. And no matter how fast she ran into the darkness, he only came closer and closer until she decided to stop moving and stay as still as possible. The darkness would protect her-if he couldn’t see her, and he wouldn’t be able to hear her either, so this was her best chance.

Be invisible.

Her heart wouldn’t stop pounding, though. Frantically she tried to breathe evenly so her heart would go back to normal, but it only got louder the harder she tried.

And then she realized she couldn't hear him anymore. She looked around, but it was useless. Her traitorous heart pounded away, crashing in her ears and the space around her.

"I've missed you, my little bird," came his voice from directly behind her, and his iron arms wrapped around her.

She arched up off her bed, screaming. It took her a second or two to look around her and realize where she was, and that she was safe.

Safe.

Wild, tired brown eyes took in the dark interior of her room, dimly lit by the subdued fire in the fireplace.

She didn't realize she was crying until she felt for her pillow, grabbing her wand which was hidden safely underneath it. Her pillow was wet with her tears and her perspiration, she cleaned and dried it with her wand quickly before ghosting out of her room, wrapping a robe around herself, and made her way to the little kitchenette in the common room. She filled a tall glass of water, not in the mood for tea, and settled at the window seat, facing out to the school grounds, which were still submerged in a sea of dense fog.

The dark circles under her eyes were growing more prominent. She did her best to conceal them with what few glamour charms she knew each day. Not for vanity— she could care less, to be honest. But she didn't want anyone to worry.

More specifically, she didn't want Harry and Ron to worry.

After what had taken place at the Astronomy tower several months before, nearing the end of her sixth year at Hogwarts, she had been having these nightmares. Without fail, they came every night. No Dreamless Sleep Potion or any other spell nor enchantment could help, which mystified her and made her anxious.

After having held that terrible secret for so long, Harry had finally found out about what had transpired between herself and Malfoy. The hateful man himself had boasted of the things he had forced her to do to Harry, which lifted his enchantment off of her and once the shock and trauma of the Headmaster's murder wore off, she had told him everything else. Harry, bless him, had said she didn't have to talk about it if she didn't want to. But she did. Uncomfortable as it was, she had to let it out.

As they had sat together, hidden by a large tree behind the lake, she related everything Malfoy had done to her; from the first kiss he had seized from her to the harassment and molestation afterwards, the possessive attitudes, the ring, and the M on her arm. When she had finished, she perceived Harry to be very white in the face, his solemn green eyes fixated on her.

She'd expected him to break up with her, or denounce her as his friend, even, for allowing such things to happen. But he didn't. He had only reached out and cupped her cheek softly before catching her in a desperate embrace.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione," he'd whispered. "If I'd known..."

"You're not going to break up with me?" she had asked quietly, fearfully.

He drew back. "Why would I?"

“Because I cheated on you!”

He blanched. “Hermione, he forced you to do those things, and all the rest, you weren’t willing. You weren’t willing, you didn’t love him, so it wasn’t cheating. What he did is despicable and I promise we’ll find him and bring him down,” he’d promised.

But it seemed that Malfoy was one step ahead of them all, because by the time word had broken out to the Ministry that Draco Malfoy had murdered Albus Dumbledore, he had already disappeared.

The Ministry had launched a fierce week-long search on the Malfoy Manor and all the other properties the Malfoys owned, but had come up with nothing.

Lucius and Narcissa had claimed they had no clue where their son might be. Lucius had consented to be interviewed under Veritaserum (Narcissa was too ill to do it) but had revealed nothing useful. The Ministry backed off unwillingly, though many a member within the Order was convinced that Lucius had somehow lied to the Aurors.

Aurors were sent to scour every nook and cranny of Hogwarts, every inch of the country and all of Wizarding Britain, but the wanted party was never found.

It was as if Draco Malfoy had vanished into thin air.

And it was the thought that he was still out there that terrified Hermione every night.

Though she had told Harry about the ring, she didn’t tell him what Malfoy was using it for, about his plan to force Hermione into marrying him. She had only told him that he had used it to control her.

Her eyes swept slowly across the landscape below, and her body was tense, as if she expected him to come crawling from the thick mist over the grounds, and march right up to the castle. She had dreamt that several times over. Other times, she’d dreamt that she had turned in for bed, and that he had been waiting in the dark corners for her to fall asleep, and then he would creep in beside her. Those always felt so real, and they followed her regardless of where she stayed, whether it was Hogwarts, her own home, or the room she shared with Ginny at the Burrow.

He was out there somewhere.

His voice cut through her thoughts. She could hear him clearly, as though he was right there with her.

“Don’t think even for a moment that you’ve gotten rid of me, pet, because I’ll be back for you.”

She searched the sky, but could not find the moon. Dark, ominous clouds had taken up residence in the previously clear sky, and as she watched a heavy, crashing rain fell upon the earth.

Immediately following the murder of the Headmaster, Professor McGonagall had become the new Headmistress. The funeral had taken place soon afterwards, she had watched from afar as they had lowered his white marble tomb into the ground.

Harry and Ron had asked why she had not gone, but she knew they would not understand if she told them.

She had caused Albus Dumbledore's death. If it were not for her, he would still be alive, and the their side would have a brighter chance at winning the war. She did not deserve to be at his funeral.

If she had just not been such a bloody coward, if she could have found a way to stop Malfoy or even kill him before he completed his task, none of this would have happened.

If she hadn't been so weak, so completely *stupid*, she would have found a way to overpower Malfoy's Imperius and tell Harry the horrible things Malfoy had done. She was a coward. She had suspected he had been up to something, but never did anything about it. Harry had been too busy and she had known it, she should have investigated what he was doing all those late hours of the night. If she had been more brave and reported him after their first incident, she would not be jumping at shadows now.

Dumbledore wouldn't have been murdered.

Bill wouldn't have been bitten by Greyback.

Harry wouldn't be so lost.

And she wouldn't be having night terrors of the man she despised and feared more than any other she had ever known.

A loud, muffled snore startled her, and she glanced at the Head Boy's door. She found it slightly amusing how Neville (the new Head Boy) only snored on rainy nights. She'd been meaning to look into that for quite some time.

She turned back to the window, looking out through the rain. It calmed her a little, the rain.

It was easy to imagine the dark, turbulent sky was her mind, and the rain drops were her thoughts, falling, falling, until they collided with the ground and disappeared. She could feel the tension slipping out of her limbs already, though the melancholy was still there.

Maybe when the sky was clear and bright again, maybe she would feel better.

The hour was late and her eyes were heavy; her thoughts began to slow down, but she was resistant to the thought of going back to sleep. It took hours for her to be able to fall asleep, and even then she was always worried that the night terrors would come again, no matter how hard she tried to escape them.

This was routine for her now. It had started right after that horrible night on the Astronomy Tower. She had had to find ways to hide this from her parents, the Weasleys, and Harry as she had stayed with them over the summer. They had enough to worry about, each of them. Nightmares mattered little compared to the death of a great wizard who had held so much together. She would worry about herself for the time being as she tried to find a way to halt the nightmares. They couldn't last forever, after all.

She had stayed with her parents only two months before leaving to stay at the Burrow for the rest of the summer. She had elected to tell them only about the situation with Cormac and not Malfoy. It wouldn't have mattered anyway, if she had told them about Malfoy, too. Not after what she had done.

To keep them safe.

If Malfoy was still targeting her, there was no telling what he might do to try and capture her. She wouldn't let her parents be caught in that crossfire. She had been planning to do it anyway, even before the Malfoy situation had arisen. Obliviating her own parents and giving them new identities, then sending them off to another country was singularly the hardest thing she'd ever had to do. It tore at her heart every day.

When this is all over, when Voldemort and Malfoy are dealt with, I'll find them. And tell them everything. Even if they never forgive me.

But how long would that take?

She didn't want to think about that.

It was odd to think that this would be her final year of education at Hogwarts. At least, these would be her last months, if she, Harry, and Ron stuck to their plan.

You will be safe at Hogwarts, they'd promised her and Harry. First the Aurors who had interviewed them after the night of Dumbledore's murder, then the Order, when it had been time to go back to the ancient castle.

More security enchantments and wards, curses and protective shields had been set up around the school.

Safe, they had told her. *You'll be safe*. The word had been repeated so often its meaning was lost to her now. It felt empty.

If he managed to get Death Eaters inside Hogwarts once, even with all the complex protective enchantments it had before, how do you know he can't do it again? She had asked dully.

No one had answered her.

Hogwarts had always been her home. All these years she had grown with the naïve thoughts that nothing bad could ever come inside its walls, even when time and time again she had been proved wrong.

Back then, she hadn't known that a person could be filled with pure evil, hadn't known that the pale, elegant boy who had sneered at her for standing with Harry Potter and Ron Weasley would grow into a frightening young man who was as deadly as he was handsome. She hadn't known his hatred for her would somehow spiral into a horrifying obsession.

The rain began to let up, and the clouds oh so slowly made their way out of the scene. She could see the faintest rays of sunlight peeping in through the horizon.

A small patch of light caught on her arm, highlighting her skin just underneath the mark Malfoy had given her. No matter what she had tried, nothing would remove the scar. He must have used dark magic to make it permanent. She hated knowing it was there, a constant reminder of the things he had done to her while she had been unconscious. The best she could do was pull her sleeve over it and pretend it didn't exist.

That's just what she had been doing for the past month and a half. Pretending.

Her marks were just the way they had always been. She completed all her Head Girl duties, did her homework, hung out with her two best friends, and studied for hours in the library. She was a Gryffindor and she would act like one, not allowing her true fear and anxiety to show through.

But wherever she went, whatever she was doing, she was always on edge, always careful, lest there be a monster in the shadows, waiting for her to come closer so it could strike.

She wasn't safe here. Nor anywhere else. She never would be, as long as Draco Malfoy was still out there, hunting her.

2. Diagon Alley

The vivid green of the pastures and magnificent trees had faded considerably since he'd come here. Dry, withered leaves lay scattered around the grass, puppeteered by the winds that swept around the area. The sky was bleak and colourless, which only contributed to his dark mood. Draco stepped away from the window and approached his desk.

There was so much to do. All these plans and preparations took up much of his time. While it did keep him busy and the time flying, his frustration only continued to mount. A restless, angry energy filled him, and it wasn't the sort that could be alleviated with exercise. If he wasn't training for the Dark Lord, he was here making sure everything was going smoothly or walking around Hogsmeade under disguise, hoping for a bit of gossip or news from Hogwarts.

It was a great risk: there was a large price on his head, the Ministry was searching for him, and there he was, cleverly disguised with Polyjuice so he could walk among the others and hope to hear anything about his witch. His own face stared at him from all the posters that hung on the walls of the shops as he walked past, undetected.

He wasn't completely foolish, however, to go out and about alone. The Dark Lord had sent two of his men to guard Draco in case he was discovered and needed assistance. While it rankled Draco that the Dark Lord saw the necessity for *babysitters*, he was frankly surprised the Dark Lord was taking such pains. As he did not care for being caught, he paid them no attention and allowed them to follow him.

A flash of lightning illuminated the country landscape, followed by a muted roar of thunder. The lightning illuminated his office briefly. He liked to keep it dim. Draco stood up and began to pace about the room, listening to the crackles of the large fire. He felt like sitting but at the same time his mind would not give him rest-the only thing left to do was move.

Since he had been born, he had been horribly spoiled by his parents. Anything he desired he had been given without so much as a 'say please'. He was used to getting things his way so it came to reason that he was not at all accustomed to waiting for anything, nor had he ever been known for his patience. Draco Malfoy always went in for the kill, was always on time for things; never a minute late or early, for he despised wasting his time.

The moment he had realized he wanted Hermione Granger, it had taken nearly all his self-control to keep himself from striding over to where she was sat knitting herself a hat. She had been so peaceful and blissfully ignorant to the lust inside him that urged him to march over to her and claim her at once. He had pushed it away, that wretched lust, and allowed himself to drift off to sleep, comforted at least by her presence, the sound of her needles clicking. Then she had waked him up from his impromptu nap, which had just been beginning to turn into a nightmare, where he had failed his mission and his parents were killed for his failure. He had jolted awake and had reached out for what in his dreams had been an unnamed Death Eater, come to finish him off, and had been startled and yet perversely pleased by the fact that he had the insufferable Granger underneath him and bent over a table, at his mercy.

Irritation had washed over his lust, and he had snapped at her never to disturb him while he slept. Looking back now, he realized maybe he could have handled that better but then again, he didn't think she would appreciate being fucked over a table top. Of course, he wouldn't minded at all-it was one of his dearest fantasies and he couldn't wait to try it out.

If only she were here now.

Running his hands through his hair, he sighed and stopped in front of his large mahogany desk, laden with piles upon piles of documents, letters, books, and the like.

He just needed to acquire his witch first...

Stuck here as he was, he had an abundance of time. Between the training and the meetings with Blaise, the mini-missions the Dark Lord sent him out to oversee (in disguise, obviously), looking over the adjustments being made to the Manor, he always found himself here, restless and randy and most of all, angry.

It was almost unbearable, thinking of how she was still inside that great castle, looked over by Potter and Weasley. Draco let out an impatient breath through his nose. Potter would still probably be very much in love with her. No doubt the Golden Couple were still together despite his wild hope that Potter would have ended things with her due to the things she had done with him; the enemy. If only he could set foot in the castle again-it would take him no time whatsoever to find the scar-headed idiot and tear him to shreds.

Couldn't they *see*? Were they all really so stupid?

Granger belonged to *him*. It was his mark that lay carved into her skin, it was *he* who would finalize the claim and keep her as his own.

Ignorant of his rage, the rain continued to fall. The steady tapping of drops against the window was oddly soothing and he stood there a moment longer, trying to calm himself but it was of no use. The fire crackled away dimly, drowned out by the rain.

A sudden urge to visit his parents seized him, but Draco shook it off. Due to the frequent searches and surveillance by the Ministry that would not be possible for some time. Even though Lucius had already testified under Veritaserum that he didn't know where his son was, the Ministry had chosen to keep his ancestral home under a watchful eye.

How utterly predicatble of them. One of the perks of being in the Dark Lord's inner circle? You knew how to override the truth-telling potion in your system, so anything you didn't want known would stay that way.

The Ministry could hound his parents all they wanted-they were never going to find him.

Tomorrow he would meet with Blaise and they would make plans for the abduction of one Hermione Granger.

As for now however, there was a fire running through his blood. A lethal mix of lust and anger coursed through him-if he had to spend another damned minute in this place then surely he would be driven to insanity if he hadn't been already and was not aware of it.

The tapping rain had grown tiresome now and so had the fire. The sounds mixed together and filled the darkening room. Draco looked around, almost expecting to see her sitting there on the armchair, reading a book.

How was she now? Was her hair longer? For the millionth time he wondered how she had spent her summer. It was common knowledge that she usually spent the late summer with Weasley and Potter-he envisioned them all together jealously. She probably felt so safe with them. Potter had probably never taken his hands off her in all that time.

He pictured her asleep in her room, how it had felt to wrap himself around her in the dead of night, and her never knowing. How delicious.

He grit his teeth.

The absence of her would undo him. He needed her.

Draco strode suddenly to the door and picked up his cloak along the way. Slamming the door shut behind him, he fastened the hood over his face to conceal his identity. The flask in his pocket was still there-he pulled it out and drank deeply from it. Immediately his features began changing, and without missing a beat he walked to the foyer, where his guards were. They straightened immediately when he came into view and followed as he left the building.

They stopped just outside the gate that surrounded the Manor, still inside the wards and protective barriers that obscured them from view and anyone's knowledge of them being there.

The two men looked to him.

"Diagon Alley," he said. "Same place as always." They nodded and apparated separately at once. Draco followed suit.

At once, he appeared amidst a throng of people and moved along with them as if caught in a current. A sweep of his eyes confirmed no one was watching him; he didn't need to glance back to know his companions, Rookwood and MacNair, were close by.

Since the death of the greatly esteemed Headmaster, Diagon Alley had lost much of its cheerfulness. Indeed, all its occupants were swathed in the traditional black mourning robes, blending them all together into a sad, faceless mass, ghosting through the streets. The rain fell on them as they made their way into the shops. The gloomy colouring of the sky set a bleak tone on all the scenery surrounding him, he could feel the raindrops soaking into his cloak. The sound of bells on doors ringing was a constant-the rush of hundreds of feet, of wagons being pulled, of vendors crying out their wares. He ignored it all.

The only thing that stood out was the garishly decorated (yet surprisingly successful) Weasley joke shop. Draco walked past it without giving it a second glance.

On and on he walked through the cobbled streets until he reached a more secluded area. The buildings here were dilapidated and deserted. Not a soul was to be seen. Rookwood and MacNair had blended into the shadows, ever watchful, ever present.

Or perhaps not deserted after all, he thought, as he perceived a figure walking hurriedly through the rain.

Normally he wouldn't have paid the person any attention, but in this current state his eyes lingered a fraction longer, and he felt a jolt when he saw the stranger's hair.

Long brown curls that had escaped her hood and lay plastered to her back, sodden from the rain. Briefly, this mysterious figure looked to the side and Draco thought he recognized that

profile as Hermione's. His heart skipped and then began to race. He followed her.

She was far away enough and had her back to him that she never saw him coming. She had her head down and walked quickly through the rain as if she had somewhere to be.

Not anymore.

Draco walked hard and fast, and then gave that up, stopped, and turned on his heel.

At the sound of his Apparition behind her, the stranger turned in surprise. It was too late—he lunged at her, wrapped an arm around her middle, used the other to cover her mouth.

He Apparated them back a short distance to where the abandoned houses sat. They were tucked between a narrow space in between two houses. She was fighting his hold—Draco let the stranger go and she fell back against the brick wall behind her and fell in a disoriented heap at his feet.

She scrambled back up, her eyes found his and stared in fear.

“Who the hell are you?” she asked.

Disappointment turned to rage. This woman (roughly the same age as *her*), had darker, smaller eyes, and thin, shapeless lips that had widened into a scream as he reached for her. She couldn't have been older than twenty-one, he guessed, covering her mouth as she drew another breath to cry out for help. He felt her reaching for a wand and cast an Expelliarmus, watched it fly from her pocket and onto the floor, far from them.

She tried to drive her elbow into his chest—he dodged it easily.

“Let me go! Somebody help me!”

“Silencio!” he hissed, and hurriedly pushed her facing front into the wall.

The stranger flailed underneath him as he pressed his body to hers, he had to resort to using a sticking charm to hold her wrists in place on the brick wall. It was lucky this area was abandoned, but for extra measure, he cast a Muffliato and several spells that would ward them from anyone's view or hearing.

The woman had not ceased her fighting. She kicked out backward, catching him in the shins repeatedly, and ferociously shook her head when he fisted the fabric of her robes around her waist.

He didn't say a word as he tore the garment off her. All he could see was her hair and this alone was enough to drive him wild.

She shivered as the rain began to fall more heavily on her skin as he pushed her garments away from her body. This could not be happening. It couldn't. She needed to get home! A tear fell down her cheek. She should have listened to her fiancé when he warned her not to go alone. And now she wasn't sure she would ever see him again.

She sobbed silently, her entire body shaking and convulsing from grief and fear. She could feel his cold, cold hands removing her panties, and she began to fight again, cold terror

lighting up her limbs like fireworks.

No! Merlin, wasn't there anyone nearby who had seen?

To her dismay, her captor seemed to be made of steel, for none of her attempts at freedom had managed to loosen his hold, or even get him away from her. Bile rose to her throat when she heard the zip of his trousers.

No.

Yes, he thought, as he looked down at the body beneath him.

Her body was too thin, her skin a few shades darker than *hers*. She shook violently, and he quickly snared a lock of her hair and brought it up to his nose, inhaling deeply. She smelt like cinnamon. Draco frowned.

She smelled like lavender and jasmine, and old books and rich chocolate. *Her* scent was intoxicating, it made him mad with want; he missed it dearly.

He grabbed his cock and pressed it forward, gripping the woman tightly by her hips, pretending it was Granger. The unfortunate woman shook her head once more, he could practically hear the pleas coming from her silenced mouth.

He pushed in roughly, feeling at once her tenseness and fear in the way she felt around him. He raised his hands to her breasts, and pulled hard at her nipples, eliciting the woman to cry harder and twist away.

Pulling out, he began to thrust himself violently back in and out of her dry vagina. His eyes were closed, one fist tangled in her curls and the other still clamped down on her left hip. His mind conjured images of her, of Granger writhing underneath him, those pretty lips open in a silent scream as he drove himself into her, her breasts pressed against his chest as he devoured her lips. The woman was limp, her face pressed against the wall, her body shook with the force of his thrusts. Blood was running down her thighs. She had not been a virgin, but the friction of his penis against her dry walls was tearing at her private flesh. Every thrust was agony.

Draco himself was not exempt from injury—the lack of lubrication but for her blood was proving painful. He moved urgently toward his release.

She heard him suck in a breath, and knew it was almost over.

Groaning, he thrust one more time and came inside her. The stranger's shoulders shook in silent sobs. He pulled out quickly and cleaned himself before tucking his limp penis back into his pants.

Taking one step back, he released the woman from the wall and watched as she slid down, her body caving in on itself in shame and agony. Taking down the wards, he immediately felt Rookwood and MacNair appear behind him.

Shivering, the girl looked up through her hair, and he pointed his wand at her.

“Avada Kedavra.”

The green flash of light hit her square in the chest, and she crumpled down onto the wet ground.

Draco turned to the two men.

“Get rid of the body.”

3. The Missing

“Okay,” said Neville as he brought out a small stack of parchment from his schoolbag, “I’ve gone over all of the scheduled routes and the partners and everyone else seems to be on board. I’ve talked to Harry and the other Quidditch team captains about when they want to book the pitch, and they’ll get back to me later once they’ve agreed what day each team will go.”

Hermione had to strain to hear her companion’s voice; the din and bustle of the Gryffindor common room was giving her a headache. She nodded, however, and rifled through her notes.

“I’ve spoken to Professor McGonagall about the upcoming Hogsmeade weekend. The first one is in a week’s time and we need to start collecting the parent consent forms. She also mentioned she wants to speak to us after Transfiguration tomorrow.”

Someone passed by their table suddenly, accidentally bumping into Hermione’s chair and she jumped and swiveled around but the person had gone. Hermione turned back to the table, focusing back on her parchment, silently willing her nerves to calm themselves.

For the next couple of minutes neither of them spoke another word. Neville glanced at Hermione. Though she appeared calm, he noticed the slight furrow of her brow, the way she constantly looked about them, as though expecting someone to sneak up on her.

He thought back to the first day of term when Harry had asked to speak with him in private.

“I’d really appreciate it if you kept an eye out for her, mate,” Harry had said.

“Do you really think she’ll need it?” Neville asked dubiously, half-jokingly. “After all, she is Hermione Granger.”

Harry looked around them, making sure they were alone. He leaned in, his eyes urgent.

“She was having trouble with a certain someone last year,” he’d said. “She’s still shaken up about everything, and thinks he’ll come back for her.”

Neville had taken a second to string his thoughts together. He? Come back? There were only two people who’d left Hogwarts. His first thought was that Harry must have meant Cormac McLaggen, but he had seen the aftermath of McLaggen’s attempted assault and how Hermione had handled it. He didn’t think Hermione would ever let herself become afraid of McLaggen. Malfoy, on the other hand... He didn’t know there was anything between them, and the sudden potential of it being a reality made him feel very uncomfortable, just as he always felt when in Malfoy’s cold presence. He remembered the Yule Ball the year before and how uncomfortable Hermione had looked as she had been forced to dance with Malfoy. He hadn’t watched them for very long but he had noticed just how intense Malfoy had seemed that night as he had looked at Hermione. Then, he had brushed it aside as mere contempt—Malfoy was probably as happy as Hermione was over the matter of them having to dance together in front of everyone.

Dread filled his stomach.

"Is this about Malfoy?" he asked quietly.

Harry's face had paled, but he had nodded.

"What happened?" Neville had asked, his voice low.

"I can't tell you," Harry had replied, his voice solemn. "She'd never forgive me if she found out I was asking you this."

"You said he'd come back?"

"That's what she's afraid of. She said it was the last thing he said to her. But it's never going to happen. He's too big a coward, and Hogwarts is too well protected. I know I don't have the right to ask, but will you keep an eye on her?"

"Of course, mate. No problem." Neville looked at him curiously. "But you're her boyfriend. Shouldn't this be your job?"

Harry's shoulders had slumped, and he looked away resignedly.

"Ever since he left and she told me, she's been distant. I think she still feels guilty even though what happened wasn't her fault. She's scared, but she's trying to hide it. Probably so I won't worry." He struck at the wall suddenly. Neville jumped.

"Calm down, Harry," Neville said nervously.

Harry shut his eyes, breathing deeply.

"I wish I'd known," he said. "I wish I'd known as it was happening so I could have helped her. I feel useless that I can barely help her now."

"What makes you think you're not helping her?" Neville had asked, frowning. "She seems relaxed whenever she's with you."

"I just worry that she's trying to downplay what happened so we can focus on defeating Voldemort," Harry admitted. "She keeps pretending she's fine but I know she's not."

"Give her time," Neville suggested softly. "She'll be okay."

Harry gave him a weary smile. "She will."

Now, snapping back to the present, Neville realized Hermione had caught him watching her and seemed confused.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

He shook his head and began to stuff his things back into his bag.

"I need some rest. Have you seen Luna anywhere?" he asked, perhaps a bit too quickly.

Perplexed, she pointed to the farthest corner from them, where a Luna was curled up in a stuffy armchair, reading the latest edition of *The Quibbler*.

"Thanks," he muttered, slinging his bag over his shoulder. "See you tomorrow." And he was gone.

Sliding down a little in her seat, Hermione sighed, grateful she and Neville didn't have to patrol tonight. It had been a long day and she needed rest, but that didn't seem possible here. Normally she would wait for Harry and Ron, but at the moment they were with the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team outside. She had no desire to sit and listen to their tales of stupendous plays and who had received which injuries, so she decided to leave for her room instead.

Standing up quickly she gathered her things and hastened to her dorm. Once she was inside the head common room, she carefully set down her bag by the umbrella stand. She rubbed her temples as she made her way over to the large table by the mini kitchen and sat down, reaching for an orange from the fruit bowl when something caught her eye.

The large letters that made up the headline of that day's Daily Prophet stared up at her ominously.

MISSING: Susannah Hastings

Hermione grabbed the paper and looked at the picture of a young woman with dark, serious eyes and a thin, angular figure standing beside a rather handsome man who Hermione deduced to be her fiancé due to their matching rings and the intimate embrace he held her in. Susannah smiled radiantly at the camera, her light brown curls swaying in the breeze. Hermione lowered her eyes to read the article.

As of October 9th, (insert year here), Miss Susannah Hastings, daughter of Henrietta and George Hastings, has been declared missing.

Miss Hastings was last seen in Diagon Alley, by her friend Miss Melinda Rodet, who reported nothing had seemed amiss with her friend.

"She was in high spirits," Rodet recalls, 'she'd been looking to buy a gift for Reginald, her fiancé, before their wedding next month.' Outraged at the implications that Miss Hastings may have been a runaway bride, Rodet said, "Susannah loves Reginald with all her might. There's no way she ever would have left him like this willingly."

Miss Hastings' parents are beside themselves with worry; a reward of 500 galleons is being offered for information or the safe return of their only daughter.

This is the second disappearance within the month. The first disappearance was that of Annabelle Farway, who still has not been found. Ministry Aurors are asking that anyone who might have information on the attacker please step forward.

The article went on, giving information on who to contact if anyone had seen either member of the missing party. Hermione dropped the paper back down on the table and stood up, appetite gone. It must have been a slow news day at the Prophet Headquarters if they actually wrote about this. She knew for a fact from the Order that there were more than these two disappearances. At least three other people had disappeared beside the two unfortunate women listed in that day's paper, but no articles had been written for them, which perplexed and outraged her. She had only heard this news from the Order.

It was an unsafe time; all these people were vanishing left and right. The Aurors worked day and night to solve the strange cases but would any of them ever be found? Hermione

frowned. Who could be doing this? It couldn't be Malfoy, could it? What would he be kidnapping strangers for, if he was the one doing it?

It couldn't be him. Couldn't it? He had committed a horrible murder and was high up on the Wanted list. Most everyone still grieved for Dumbledore and were angered that the culprit hadn't been caught. If they caught sight of Malfoy they would not let him go easily.

He wouldn't dare return, would he?

That only left Voldemort and his torrid Death Eaters. Hermione shivered and went into her room to change into warmer clothing.

They were all innocent people, why target them? Even children were being taken, but everyone knew Fenrir Greyback was behind this. She fervently wished those children were safe and sound and would be rescued. But that was a false hope.

After she climbed into bed Hermione made sure her wand was secure under her pillow. No one would ever know how comforting it was to know Malfoy was not sharing that space with her anymore, that he would never have access to her rooms again. She thought back to all the times he had intruded without her knowing and clutched her wand tighter underneath her pillow. All summer she had had nightmares of being held in her sleep by someone she could not see, but well knew it was Malfoy. Every morning she would wake and inspect herself over to make sure the mysterious bruises and marks were not appearing on her body again. She used to be a deep sleeper-now any faint sound in the dead of night would have her lurching awake in bed, fearing that he had returned.

Neville had always been a perfect gentleman, she never worried about him, but the close proximity of her wand helped her sleep better. That, and her door was always locked no matter what.

When she closed her eyes at last Malfoy's smug face greeted her there in the darkness. Hermione ground her palms into her eyes to rid herself of the image. Her skin crawled. She turned to lie on her side, her eyes open in the dark, remaining that way for hours, unable to sleep.

Every time she closed them she fancied she could feel his arm slithering around her waist from behind, and any faint trace of sleep that had been inching forward before would rush away.

Beyond frustrated, she sat up in bed, brought her knees to her chest, held her head in between them.

She was so tired of this.

You did this to me.

Suddenly it felt like there was someone beside her on the bed. Either she had imagined it or it was simply a draft but it felt like someone had just *breathed* onto her shoulder, and at once Hermione shot up and out of the bed with a pounding heart, wand raised and pointed accusingly at the bed, which was empty after all. It took a moment for her to calm back down and settle into bed again, but when she closed her eyes again he was still there, waiting, his eyes rarely blinking, his smile taunting, victorious. She willed it away.

Rot in hell, bastard.

“For homework, simply practice what we learned today. By the end of class tomorrow I want to have seen each and every one of you successfully change the color of your hair,” said Professor (and Headmistress) McGonagall, looking sternly around the large classroom. Her students, frustrated with the complexity of the spell, stared incredulously at her.

Enough of that. I know you’ll manage it, she thought.

Her sharp eyes landed on her favorite student, who sat seriously at her desk, humbly helping each peer who sought her help. She felt a sense of pride for the young woman, taking in her now-raven tresses. So far, she was the only one who had succeeded in the color-changing spell.

Dean Thomas had managed to set his hair on fire. She wasn’t surprised. The boy seemed to have an affinity with the element. Longbottom was partially successful; he had streaks of golden yellow hairs mixing with his dark locks. She hid her chuckle with a well-timed cough. Two students had managed to change the texture of their hair—one student with wavy hair had turned it pin-straight, and the poor young man who’d had a good crop of wavy hair had become the laughing stock of the classroom when he’d managed to add several inches to his hair. So much so that at the moment it hung down to his toes and still growing rapidly. He’d been dispatched to Madame Pomfrey at once.

Merlin knows what she’d do with the hair.

The bell rang, dismissing the students, and they all scrambled up and out of the room within seconds.

Only Longbottom and Granger stayed and she strode to her desk, pleased, as they walked up.

She couldn’t have chosen a better Head Boy. He’d surprised them all, having grown from a frightened, clumsy, and witless boy to an intelligent, confident and capable young man. (Yet at times, his former self still could appear.)

Last year’s Head Boy, Malfoy had done well, which had given her hope. A very intelligent young man, he would be able to go very far, anyone could tell that much. But there was no chance of that as long as he was still on the wrong side. She had appealed to Dumbledore a year ago, that his was a case worth saving. Perhaps he had not been totally corrupted yet. Perhaps the boy could be saved. They had purposely chosen him, thinking that maybe the honor of it and the exposure to someone of the opposite side could whip him into shape, perhaps even change him.

All for naught, she thought drily in her mind, and grief flooded her for an instant as she thought back to what had happened in the past year.

She had been too late. Her best friend was gone, and all by her own suggestion.

At sensing the moisture in her eyes she frowned and blinked the tears away, banishing them from her tear ducts. It would not do to cry. That would not help anyone, and now was not the proper time to grieve. She had done enough of that over the summer.

They had approached her desk, and she raised her hand just as Longbottom opened his mouth to speak.

“What do you two think about having a Masquerade Halloween Ball?” she asked. “Something to lift the air of mourning.”

Neville’s eyes lit up at once. “It seems a wonderful idea, Professor.”

“How much time do we have to get everything ready?” Hermione asked.

“It will be on the thirty-first,” the Headmistress said. ‘You have more than enough time to prepare, especially seeing as it’s you two working on it.’ She bestowed upon them a rare half-smile. “I will be giving the announcement at dinner tomorrow,” she announced.

“If you don’t mind my asking, why not earlier, Professor?” Neville asked.

“Because if she announces it during breakfast, that’s all anyone will think about for the rest of the day. It’s best they get the initial excitement out of the way before they get to class,” Hermione interjected.

The Headmistress nodded.

“Will that be all, Professor?” Hermione inquired.

“Quite. You are dismissed.”

“First things first,” Neville began as they made their way towards the Head Common Room, “shall we allow the usage of masks?”

“I suppose so,” Hermione said slowly, “Although we’ll have to remind everyone to behave. There’s no denying someone will try to pull a little mischief.”

“Right,” Neville agreed. ‘Oh Merlin, look at my hair!’ he cried as he caught his reflection on a suit of armor they had been walking by. “You didn’t tell me I look like a bloody skunk.”

Hermione stifled a laugh and inspected his handiwork as he turned to her with pleading eyes.

“Could you fix it?”

“Weren’t you paying attention?” Hermione teased. “McGonagall said the effects of the spell last for a few hours.”

Neville groaned, still pulling at his hair.

“Oh, just relax!” Hermione chided, trying to pull him away from his reflection. ‘It doesn’t look that bad,’ she lied through her teeth, “and I don’t think Luna will mind.”

“It’s true, she’s seen worse,” he laughed. “But I admit I envy you and your flowing raven locks.” He snagged one of her curls and held it up to his own hair, smiling.

“I’m sorry Neville,” Hermione choked out through her laughter. “I don’t think curls are very becoming for you.”

Suddenly she stopped, her eyes wide with realization.

“Hermione?” Neville asked, releasing her lock of hair. “Are you all right?”

“What happened to him?” her eyes were oddly vacant. Worried, Neville touched her shoulder.

“Who, Hermione? Who are you talking about?” he asked.

“Cormac,” she whispered. “Cormac McLaggen.”

Neville scowled. “*Him*? Why are you asking about him, Hermione? What’s wrong?”

Draco watched her through hooded eyes.

“Speaking of your attacker, Granger, have you heard of him lately?”

She looked at him for a moment, horror dawning upon her. “What did you do?”

“You’ll find out in due time, pet.”

Hermione looked up at him. “Has anyone heard from him at all since last year?” she asked.

Dumbledore’s murder had left them not much room to think of anything else over the summer. Hermione had been swallowed by her fear of Malfoy’s threat of returning to even remember the one about Cormac.

How could I have forgotten it? I’ve become too stupid.

Neville shrugged. “He was expelled, wasn’t he? That’s all I know.”

Hermione nodded, feigning a look of relief on her face. Inside, her mind was in a frenzy.

Something wasn’t right.

4. Anchor

“Professor?” asked Hermione, hovering by the door.

Headmistress/Professor McGonagall looked up from the copy of the Daily Prophet she had been reading.

“Yes, Miss Granger?” She waved at the seat before her desk and Hermione stepped inside the office.

“This won’t take long... I-I was just wondering about what happened to Cormac McLaggen,” Hermione said hesitantly.

Putting aside her newspaper, the older woman peered up at Hermione through her spectacles.

“You were present when he was expelled, unless my memory is failing me.”

“Yes, but I was just thinking how odd it is that nobody has heard from him since.”

The Headmistress folded her hands on her desk.

“There’s not much to say, really,” she began. ‘Shortly after his expulsion I was informed by his parents that they planned to move to America. Perhaps they decided a change of schools was the best remedy for their son’s behavior.’ She wrinkled her brow. “Although I couldn’t imagine why they would want to. The American schools lack finesse.”

Feeling the weight on her shoulders lift, Hermione managed a tiny smile. McGonagall gave her a stern stare.

“Is there a reason for your concern?”

“Morbid curiosity, I suppose.”

“Then will that be all?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“The Masquerade Ball is in a few days. Is everything in order?”

“Just about. We’ve decided not to book a band this year if that’s alright. We’re simply going to hire a string quartet to make things more sophisticated,” Hermione added.

“A sensible choice,” McGonagall paused for a moment, “Dumbledore... Albus always insisted on a Masquerade party. I always said no. With young people, they rarely go well.”

There was a mourning look in her eyes but her tone of voice was one of mild irritation, like an older sibling speaking of their youngest. Hermione wanted to smile but restrained it, too aware of the fact that this was perhaps the most personal conversation she had ever had with her Head of House.

"I hope I do not regret this," she said, and there was no further hint of any other emotion in her voice.

"We will make sure it goes well," Hermione promised.

McGonagall's eyes turned sharp again. Back to business.

"Have you found a costume yet?"

"I found something a week ago in Hogsmeade. Or rather, Ginny found it, and she made me buy it," Hermione replied, laughing softly.

"And you are going with Mr. Potter?" McGonagall asked.

"He hasn't asked me yet, but I suppose so," Hermione said, her hands suddenly fumbling and tied up in each other.

The older woman nodded, pushing her chair back and standing up. She gave Hermione a small smile.

"Very well. You must forgive me for being abrupt, my dear, but there is a staff meeting in a matter of minutes and I must be on my way."

"Of course," Hermione conceded and left.

Walking back to her dorm, she felt her smile grow wider. So Malfoy had been bluffing after all. Although she still wasn't feeling very hospitable towards Cormac, she was glad he was out of Malfoy's grasp.

"Hey."

She turned quickly and waved to Ron, who was approaching her from the staircase she had just passed.

"What is it, Ron?" she asked.

"We need to talk," he said seriously.

Hermione frowned. "Okay, shall we go to the common room?"

"We can't talk there about this," he said. "Look, let's go in there."

"Er-okay."

They went into a nearby empty classroom.

"What's this about?" she asked, crossing her arms. "Are you mad at me? What did I do?"

"Funny," he said, "I was going to ask you the same thing."

"What do you mean?"

Ron crossed his arms too and frowned at her. "You've been avoiding me."

Hermione feigned a laugh. "No, I haven't. I've been really busy lately, you know that, with all the duties I have and all this studying."

“Then why won’t you look me in the eye anymore? You’ll spend time with Harry but I don’t think you and I’ve spoken for more than ten minutes since term started. You hardly sit with me and Harry at meals, you know.” His expression changed to one of hurt. “We’re your best friends, Hermione. You know you can always tell us anything.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she muttered, crossing her arms and lifting her chin to meet his sad blue eyes. “I’m not mad at you, either. It’s just—”

“You bloody well know,” he said softly, almost angrily. “You’re embarrassed about what happened last year. You think it’s your fault he died, don’t you? Is that what Malfoy brainwashed you into thinking?”

“He didn’t brainwash me, Ron,” she said. “It’s just all so hard to talk about, okay? It was bad enough telling Harry about it.”

“I understand that,” he said gently. “I just wanted to make sure I didn’t play a part in you not opening up.”

“Not at all.”

“You hardly spoke a word all summer, Hermione. Harry and I are worried about you.”

“I’m fine,” she insisted. “Obviously that wasn’t the best couple of months for me or anyone else for that matter but I’m alright, Ron, I promise.”

“You’ve got a right to be upset about this *and* be upset about Dumbledore,” he said. “What happened to him doesn’t make what happened to you any less awful.”

“Dumbledore is gone,” she said, shaking her head. ‘He mattered so much more than my problems with Malfoy.’ She faltered. “If-If I hadn’t been so stupid and weak, I could have stopped Malfoy sooner.”

“Don’t talk about yourself like that,” he said. “Harry said Malfoy kept you from getting help.”

She nodded. “But he didn’t in the beginning. I had time to tell and get help, and I didn’t because I thought it would go stop, and I was unused to the situation, and I was *scared*.”

“Hermione...”

“It’s my own fault,” she said, her voice wavering. “All of it. Even Dumbledore.”

His frown deepened. “No, it isn’t. None of it is.”

“How do you know for sure?” she asked sharply. “Even Malfoy said it. I had so much time to get help and because I didn’t, I only made it easier for him.”

She took a step back, crying, hiding her face in her hands. Ron approached her slowly, put his hand on her arm.

“Malfoy said the curse, not you,” he said. “Malfoy took advantage of you because he’s no better than troll dung. You know Dumbledore would rather have died than let Malfoy take you with him.”

“But he died anyway!” Hermione said, agitated. “He died because I wouldn’t—”

“You wouldn’t kiss Malfoy!” Ron finished for her. “No one blames you for that. That was a rotten trick he pulled, but you and I both know that he was going to kill Dumbledore whether you did it or not.”

“But if I had, that would have bought us time! Harry could have killed or restrained him then! But because I wouldn’t, he killed him!”

Her voice had turned shrill, thickened by tears. Ron reached for her and she hesitated before stepping in close and he crushed her to him in one of his bear hugs reserved especially for her.

“We can’t change what’s already happened, Hermione,” he said gently. “Malfoy bears the blame, not you. You’re not weak, either. You fought him off! You’re still here and the best thing you can do is heal and grow stronger. Me and Harry will be here with you every step of the way.”

A great wet sniff escaped her and she began to sob then, tears soaking into his robes as he held her. Ron made soothing noises and rubbed her back, letting her burrow her head into the front of his robes as she broke down.

“I just hate him so much,” she said through her tears. And then laughed abruptly.

He smiled.

“I know.”

By the time she had stopped crying Ron’s arms were stiff and sore, and her eyes were quite red.

“Feeling better?” he asked, and she nodded.

She sniffed and was silent, wiping at her eyes. “I didn’t mean to avoid you for so long,” she said. “I’m sorry, Ron.”

“I want you to know something, Hermione,” he said quietly. “I know you went through a lot last year, and I know you may not feel comfortable talking about it with me, but I want you to know I’m here for you. I always will be.”

Her arms had crossed again. She wiped at her eyes one last time and smiled at him.

“Thank you,” she said. Ron pressed a kiss to her forehead and released her.

“Let’s go find Harry, eh?” he asked. “I bet he’s asleep in the common room again.”

“Your hair’s back to normal,” Harry commented the next day as he approached Hermione, whom he had just encountered on his trip to the back of the library. She was standing, having just gotten up to fetch more books when she had caught sight of him.

Hermione lifted a lock of her own hair, smiling as she examined the familiar dark brown curls.

“I rather liked it when it was black,” she admitted. “It made me feel like a different person.”

“No matter what your hair color is, I’ll like you all the same,” Harry said softly.

The color heightened in her cheeks and he watched as she fidgeted nervously for a second, smiling shyly.

“How did you know I was here?” she asked, willing her cheeks to stop their infernal flaming. “You rarely ever come all the way back here.”

“Maurauder’s Map, of course,” he grinned.

She smiled back, and took in his Quidditch robes slung over his arm. “Shouldn’t you be at practice? Or did something happen?” she inquired.

“I should probably be going,” he agreed, “But I think they can get on without me for a minute or two, don’t you think?”

She frowned. “I suppose so, but would that be setting a good example?”

Harry smiled and sat down beside her. “I reckon they don’t mind having some extra time before practice.”

She leaned into him and he turned to face her better. Gave her a moment to adjust, then caught her lips with his own. The pressure of her lips against his was sweet. Even sweeter was the way her hand came up to his chest, just underneath his collar.

Hermione felt her mind cloud as he kissed her with a passionate fervor she struggled to replicate. The talk she’d had with Ron the day before was still weighing over her. Did Harry know what they had talked about? She wanted to ask.

He was kissing against her throat now, his breathing tickling her skin. Worried, she glanced around to see if anyone had noticed, but they were shielded from anyone else’s view by the nearest bookcases.

His hand slid down her waist to her hip. Hermione felt anxiety tighten in her chest, even as she kissed him back.

“I had to see you,” he said, his voice low in her ear. “I’ve been thinking about you all day.”

Oh.

Heat flooded her face. Her head fell back as his mouth trailed its way up her throat and back up to her lips. His hand at her hip gave an experimental squeeze. Her breath caught.

Her kisses were unsure and hesitant, and a small part of him began to worry.

He pulled her more tightly against his body and she made to pull away, but with a sudden fierceness he did not know he possessed he backed her into the wall, her gasp of alarm muffled by his kiss.

“Wait—” she began, but could not finish her plea for him to stop before he pressed his lips to hers again, and Hermione felt her own voice drown inside of herself. She reached out to hold him at an arm’s length but when he felt her hands clenching at the front of his robes he misread the action as enthusiasm and pressed on.

“I do—”

He pressed his hips against hers and she felt his desire through his trousers and suddenly, it wasn't Harry before her but Malfoy himself; his clear eyes hooded with desire as he made love to her mouth. She froze, her heart pounding.

It's Harry, she tried to remind herself. Not Malfoy.

But his hands slid down her back and cupped her bum through her skirt, and suddenly she was trapped between Malfoy and a door and his hand was around her throat and his hand was crawling all over her body.

Harry's hand squeezed her bum gently.

The stupor broke-she wrestled against his hold, wrenching her head to the side when he came up for air.

"Harry, let me go," she whispered.

The desire in his eyes cleared at once as he took in her anxious, frightened expression.

She was looking at him as if he were a monster.

"Oh Merlin," he breathed, but before he could move she had pushed him away rather violently from herself and had gathered her things as quickly as she could with shaking hands.

"Hermione," he pleaded. "Please— I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking-Hermione!" He followed her as she made her exit, grabbing her arm.

She whipped around, curls fanning out behind her, and pointed her wand at him.

His heart cracked at the look of utter betrayal and hurt in her eyes, which were threatening to overflow with tears. He let her go.

"Do not come near me," she ordered, her voice was wild and furious, and yet impossibly sad. "I do not want you around me right now."

She turned and fled.

Neville looked up as the door to the Head Common Room opened and a very shaken Hermione stepped through, wiping at her eyes with the sleeve of her robe. He frowned.

She had seen him by now, and guiltily made a beeline straight for her room.

"What's wrong?" he asked, quickly taking in her appearance, looking for bruises or scrapes or lingering effects of any jinxes or hexes that might have been sent her way.

His eyes took in her swollen lips, her mussed hair and disheveled robes, and he froze. Normally girls enjoyed a good snog, but he guessed this was the opposite for Hermione, who was still trying to dry the tear tracks on her cheeks. Try all she might, her efforts did not reduce the redness of her eyes. Who had done it? Who had reduced her to this state?

"Who was it?" he asked.

"Harry," she muttered sadly.

“What did he do?” he demanded, leading her inside to her room and sitting her down on her bed and handed her a tissue.

She muttered a small thanks and blew her nose daintily before she looked away and said, “He acted just like **he** did.”

Neville understood at once who she meant.

“...Like Cormac?” he asked, hating himself for not being able to reveal he knew who she really was talking about.

She hesitated for a second, but nodded quickly.

“He kissed me, and it was ok at first,” she confessed. “But then it got... intense, and he wouldn’t stop, and all I could see was M-Cormac in my head, and I panicked.” She couldn’t meet his eyes, tears of shame trailed down her cheeks.

“I’m so stupid,” she groaned, holding her face in her hands. “He’s my *boyfriend*, for Merlin’s sake! One snog and I fall to pieces!”

“Hermione, he crossed the line. You weren’t comfortable and he should have stopped when he realized that. He should have known you wouldn’t be ready for something like that yet.”

“I should have *told* him,” Hermione said. “I wasn’t having a good day and all I could think about was what happened last year. I had to push him away from me.”

“Well I’m proud of you for defending yourself,” Neville said.

“I feel awful,” she admitted. “I can’t go one day without thinking of him. It’s ruining everything.”

“You just need time,” Neville said patiently. “The thing with McLaggen wasn’t that long ago. Of course it’s still fresh on your mind. But you have control over whether it’ll affect you forever or not.”

She nodded.

“You’re right,” she said faintly. “I won’t let it.”

Or at least, I’ll try not to let it. He can’t win.

Neville left Hermione brooding in her room and returned to the common room. He sighed.

What the hell, Harry.

It looked like his Potions essay would have to wait. What was the matter with everyone lately? Neville set out for the Gryffindor tower in search of Harry.

Draco hung up his cloak and sat down at his desk, grimacing as he banged his injured leg against the upholstery.

It had been a rough day; his training session with the Dark Lord that morning had just about depleted his energy and it was taking up the last of it now to restrain himself from

dropping to the floor and sleeping there. Not even Aunt Bella had remained unscathed by the Dark Lord's tantrum. Draco suspected the Dark Lords' foul mood had something to do with the rumors of his latest plan being foiled once again by the blasted Order of the bloody Phoenix.

Pain flared up in his leg again as he dropped down into an armchair, reaching for his wand. Once the injury had been healed he leaned back in his chair and sighed, feeling better than he had in days. So far he'd learnt numerous new dark spells and battle tactics, he had volunteered to serve in several small missions meant for the Death Eaters. All of them had been the same: find a certain person and either annihilate them or take them to the Dark Lord.

He thought to his dallies in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. His most recent visit had been his fourth; he'd found another mark who very nearly completely resembled his Hermione: she'd had the large brown eyes and the upturned nose, the pouty, delicate lips, and of course, the curls. But she had had too-thick eyebrows and a large birthmark by her right ear. Nonetheless, he had had fun with her. He'd lured her into a secluded corner and apparated her into a shoddy cabin somewhere in the country-side, where he'd spent hours fulfilling his fantasies. He could only imagine what Hermione would feel like as he thrust into the unfortunate woman, hoarsely moaning out her name as he spilled himself inside her again and again. She had been disposed of in the same manner as the others before her, and surprisingly, Draco's frustration mounted rather than relented.

The pleasure was always fleeting-it never lasted long after the sex. What he'd thought would tame his lust only inflamed it, and at the same rate it grew, so did his temper. Draco frowned deeply, wondering what she was up to at the moment. Was she with Potter now? Or was the little bird hiding away in her own room?

"I've news."

The voice brought him out of his reverie, and he looked up. Blaise stood at the door to his study, looking as though he was on the verge of breaking into a smug grin.

Draco motioned for him to come in and sit down.

"Do tell."

Blaise sat down eagerly and hunched forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

"I heard from a reliable source," he began.

Draco snorted.

"That Granger and the Head Boy are to host a Masquerade Ball on Hallow's Eve," he finished grandly, as though Draco had never interrupted. Grinning, he conjured himself a glass of wine.

"I must go," Draco said at once. A hundred possible plans began to take form in his mind; was the hour come at last? If everything went well he'd finally have her.

"Wonderful, darling, but how?" Blaise quipped, swirling the wine around in the glass before taking a sip. "You're not exactly welcome at Hogwarts, you know."

"Of course I'm not welcome at that bloody school," Draco drawled. "But who says I'm going as myself?"

5. Atonement

Hermione sifted carefully through her folder for the paper she needed. She needed to find it so she could give it to Neville before they headed down to breakfast. Finding it at last with a quiet hum of satisfaction, she set it down on her dresser and swept her brush through her curls one last time before clipping it so her hair fell in a heavy mass down her back.

She shouldered her bag and set off quickly for the common room, whistling softly as she went. The halls she passed through were bright with the morning light; fueling her cheerful disposition. She tried hard not to think about what had happened with Harry a few days before. Ever since that day he'd followed her relentlessly, wanting to talk, wanting to apologize.

She had ignored him every time; the first had been the hardest, she'd nearly gave in. Nearly.

But as she had thought on it, she realized that she had already forgiven him. She couldn't pinpoint exactly when, but what mattered was that she had forgiven him. Fundamentally she knew how different he and Malfoy were. That snog with Harry had still been consensual from the beginning, but when he had advanced it to touching her more intimately than they had done so far in their relationship was where the trouble had arisen, and where the memory of Malfoy had come up. She'd had no issue with him exploring her in that way were it not for the memory of Malfoy to rise unbidden and spoil it.

Malfoy would have continued. Harry had stopped and realized what was wrong. She had seen the immediate horror and remorse in his eyes. Malfoy would have felt no remorse whatsoever.

So why was it she couldn't bear to look at him, or even be around him?

She thought back to what he had said.

"No matter what your hair color is, I'll like you just the same."

What if he got tired of this, though? Of having to wait for her to get over what Malfoy had done? What if he was only staying with her out of pity?

Suppose he's just too nice to say he's had enough? If I can't handle one snog, how is the rest of this relationship supposed to go?

But Harry had been patient and kind all summer after the hideous truth about Malfoy's actions had been revealed. He had felt awful that he had not known or been able to help, and he had understood when she said she'd needed some space and he had honored that, and slowly she had adjusted to the aftermath. The nightmares had continued but they had been able to come together bit by bit.

You've got to remember that Malfoy's gone, she thought to herself as she entered the Great Hall. And Harry would never hurt you intentionally.

There weren't many students around, and she wasn't surprised. She had always had a habit of waking too early in the morning. Brushing her thoughts aside, she swept over to the table and promptly sat down in front of Neville, who was dozing into his porridge.

"Neville," she whispered, poking at his shoulder with her wand. "Wake up!"

"I don't really want to, though," he muttered groggily as his eyes opened.

Hermione took in his appearance. His hair, usually neatly combed and parted to one side, was in terrible disarray, with tufts standing out all over his head. His eyes were bleary and red; his face had a pinched look to it.

"You look terrible," she said. "What happened?"

"Your boyfriend happened," he snapped a little too angrily. When he saw her slightly hurt expression, he apologized and pushed his bowl away, leaning on the table with his elbows.

"Harry's been badgering me, asking me to tell you that he'd like to speak to you. I told him you still didn't want to see him but he wouldn't stop. I snuck off to the library to study for my NEWTS and it got pretty late; I must have dozed off or something; because next thing I know he's sitting in front of me, waiting for me to wake up so he can give you *this*." He fished a small note out of his satchel and thrust it at Hermione.

She took it.

"Thanks, Neville."

He patted her arm. "Tell him to make use of his owl next time. But let me know if you need anything." He stood and stretched, yawning widely. "I've got an hour until my first class. I'm going to nap."

"Alright," Hermione conceded, looking down at the note. "But before I forget, here." She handed him the paper she had found earlier and watched as he waved and left, tucking the parchment into his bag.

She eyed the note warily, then the space around her. More students were coming in now, chatting merrily amongst themselves while others rushed in, propping their books and pieces of parchments on the table so they could finish an assignment before class. The noise was steadily getting louder, and she found herself feeling restless.

After she had picked up a stack of toast and some jam, she set off for the lake.

"You know what you should do? You should go and apologize already instead of moping about and wallowing in self-hatred, that's what," Ron grunted as he sat down at the Gryffindor table, reaching for the sausages.

"She won't even look at me," Harry admitted, poking at his bacon.

"And she has a right not to! What you did was pretty barmy, mate, even for you. You knew how fragile she is right now, and yet you did it!" Here Ron lowered his voice. "What she went through with Malfoy was serious, and whether you believe her lies or not, she's not okay."

She's still traumatized about things like that, and for you to nearly do the same thing doesn't make things any better." Finished, he viciously stabbed at his egg and brought it to his mouth.

Harry was looking down at his goblet, fiddling with the delicate relief pattern on it.

"I know," he said softly. 'I feel like such a shit. We were snogging and I got too into it and didn't realize she was in a different place. But I should have been careful.' He looked at the empty seat across from them. "She wouldn't even look at me the day after."

"Then wait until she's ready to see you," Ron said. "Don't push this on her; it will only frighten her more."

"We're making her sound like she's some fragile glass doll," Harry remarked bitterly. "Even though she's not. She's faced far worse and succeeded without blinking an eye, and now all it takes is two stupid blokes and she's a mess."

"You're not stupid, Harry," Ron offered. "It's what you choose to do that makes you stupid."

"What about Malfoy, then?" Harry asked dully.

"No, he's just stupid."

Harry snorted and turned to Ron. "When did you get so smart?"

Ron flushed. "I've realized acting on impulse hasn't always been the best way to do things. So now I think about things more."

He glared at Harry, who was smiling.

"Don't you go making fun of me, though, because for all my thinking, sometimes my old habits do come back," he said warningly.

Harry held up his hands in surrender. "There's no need for that, mate. Neville gave me hell for what happened already."

"Good," Ron muttered, before reaching for his pumpkin juice.

I'm sorry, the note read.

Hermione read it again and again; she could practically hear his voice in her head, saying those two words over and over.

There was an Autumn chill in the air that stilled the lake and gave everything a crisp quality; like when one takes a good, long drink of water after going a long time without it.

Luckily, she wore her cloak and her Gryffindor scarf, and beside her in a small jar, was that blue flame she was so fond of.

I'm sorry.

Still holding the note in her hand, she placed her hands behind her on the grass to support her weight and leaned back, her legs stretched out in front of her.

She felt the sun on her face, warming her hair and her body, turning the vast lake into one glorious shining mass.

She sat that way for a few more minutes until she heard the warning bell ring from the castle. Sighing, she stood and collected her school bag and trudged up to the school. Perhaps a visit was in order for later that day.

Harry was walking along the corridor after a particularly nasty Potions lesson. His scar was prickling uncomfortably and he rubbed it absentmindedly as he made his way to the Gryffindor Common Room.

Next thing he knew, he'd been seized and whisked into a small, shadowed alcove, hidden behind the large statue of Roderick the Raving.

"What—"

A hand pressed over his mouth—he found Hermione there in front of him.

Suddenly he felt nervous. There was no anger in her gaze, but the guilt of what he had done still tugged at him.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he said. "I was an idiot. I should have asked if you were okay with it."

"I was at first," she said honestly, hugging herself. "I liked it—but then a memory of Malfoy came up and it got to me. It was too much."

"I'm sorry," he said again, looking so contrite it compelled her to come forward and hug him.

"I know you didn't mean to frighten me," she said. "You're not him."

Harry's arms wrapped around her slowly. The tension that had built inside him over the last few days melted away.

"Are you still having nightmares?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "But not as often. I'm sleeping a little better, now."

"I'm glad," he said, and they pulled apart. "Next time you dream about him I want you to vividly picture me planting my fist right into his nose."

Hermione laughed. "With pleasure."

They began to walk. Hermione reached out and took his hand in hers.

"I forgave you a while ago, you know," came her soft voice from the darkness. "I've just been thinking some things over."

Harry sagged with relief at her confession, but wariness crept into his heart.

"Thinking what over?" he asked cautiously.

"I was a little scared for a bit that you would get tired of having to deal with this," she said, her eyes lowered to the ground. "I don't want you to feel like you have to stay with me for any reason other than you really wanting to."

He stopped.

"I do want to," he said. "I've always wanted to."

He was blushing. It melted her heart.

She wrapped her arms around herself.

"I was just worried that if this... trauma goes on for a long time then I wouldn't want you to feel trapped or angry with me," she said, forcing the words out. "I don't know how long it might take to get past it. I'm still so afraid that he'll come out of nowhere and take me with him. Maybe he just wanted to scare me but I believe him that he's going to try to come back. If I could I'd blink and it would be over but it might take weeks or months, or—"

Harry went to her, took her face in his hands gently.

"I told you I'd be here with you regardless of how long it takes," he said quietly. "If you need more time and space, say so, but I choose to stay with you because I love you."

Her eyes widened.

"What?"

"I have since Year 3," he said. "You were so brilliant and strong helping me break out Sirius, and then in the forest—"

She shook her head. "I fainted, remember?"

"I wouldn't have gone that far without you," he said. "Now it's my turn to help you."

She stood on her toes and kissed him, her tears smearing against his cheek.

When they broke apart, she wiped at her eyes, smiling.

"You'll go with me to the ball, won't you?" she asked.

"I was just about to ask you," Harry said, grinning. "I'd be honored to be your date."

6. Preparations

Draco allowed himself a rare smile as he ran his hand over the smooth glassy expanse, admiring the intricate detail on the work as a whole. It wasn't complete yet; it would take a bit of time before the entire thing was set and ready for her arrival but it was coming along nicely and he couldn't wait for her to see it.

And it will be ready in time, he assured himself as he stepped away and shrugged on his cloak, striding through the halls for the exit. It wouldn't do to be unprepared for when he caught his little bird. She was as resourceful as she was beautiful, and if any small detail was left unchecked then she would fly away again, and Draco was not about to risk that after he had waited so long.

The days were turning colder; the brilliant display of colors from the leaves on the trees surrounding the property had faded quickly and turned into a sea of muddy browns and oranges. The crisp air snapped at his exposed skin as he stepped outside and began to walk around the grounds, taking his time.

There was hardly anything to do but wait, which vexed him greatly. If it were possible he would have liked to visit his parents. Narcissa sent him letters whenever she felt strong enough to write, which was not often. Lucius kept mostly silent. When Draco wasn't thinking of Hermione he worried about his mother. If it weren't for the bloody Ministry stalking his parents he'd have been able to see them whenever he liked and perhaps find a way to help his mother but here he remained, much to his displeasure.

The Malfoy Manor wasn't the most inviting place, nor could he claim that he'd lived a happy life there but it was his home, and he missed its familiarity. There he had wanted for nothing and had enjoyed the solitude of his formative years. Lucius and Narcissa were safe and protected in the Malfoy Manor; they had successfully proved they "did 'not know' where their son was". As long as he didn't show up there they would be left in peace. Draco knew ways around the Ministry's surveillance but dared not risk it. What would happen to his mother then? And him? He'd never have completed his own mission.

The last time he had been there, he had shut himself up in their library and ransacked the shelves for any damn book that would hold a clue as to what was killing his mother. She had not gotten worse, but she was not getting better either. All she did was sleep; her groans of pain would slice through his mind as he tore through the priceless volumes, seeking a cure that might as well not exist. All the while his father grew increasingly distant with him (not that they'd been very chummy before), shutting himself inside his study, barely speaking at all.

He ran a hand through his hair, clenching his jaw angrily.

That was the problem with having a Death Eater for a father. The Dark Lord had ingrained it into all his followers to eradicate all emotions.

“They make you weak, pathetic, and susceptible to attack,” he had said, and everyone obeyed. Some saw it as a commodity; something essential to the self that must be mastered. The ones who didn’t agree could say nothing.

Am I the same way? He thought absently, raking his eyes over the dense forestry.

Yes, he most likely was though sometimes he surprised himself. He was a Malfoy, after all. Cold, aloof, powerful Malfoy, just like his father.

Just like your father.

Images and flashes of memories danced before his eyes with every step he took.

His father, standing above him as he wept on the floor, clutching at his toy broomstick.

His mother with her back to him in the parlour, sobbing silently into her handkerchief as he watched, hidden behind the door frame. He had never been able to figure out why she was crying, for when he made to go to her, his father called him sharply from behind and ordered him to go to his room in that tone of voice that used to make his legs shake.

The first time he had ever seen his father lose control; coolly killing a House-Elf for not serving his tea quickly-the the small, limp little body dropping to the floor like a marionette that had its strings cut. His father, calmly drinking his tea as though nothing had just happened.

Five-year-old Draco on an ‘outdoors’ trip with his father. He had been confused but excited to see his fathers’ friends there. Perhaps they had brought their sons and he would have someone to play with. They had set off on a hunt. When he had asked Lucius what kind of animal they were hunting for, he had not answered. After some time, they had come across a small cabin in the woods. There had been a loud, scraping noise and then he saw a red flash of light, and the next thing he knew, the charming little cabin was on fire. Screams could be heard from inside the structure, and he had looked to his father, waiting for him and his friends to rush inside and save the people trapped within. As the screams and cries worsened, so did the panic clawing at him. He didn’t dare speak; he never was allowed to speak around his fathers’ friends. He had frantically looked around at the others to see if they were just as concerned as he. But every face he had looked at was covered by the hoods on their cloaks; all that could be seen was the lower halves of their faces. Some of them were grinning or sneering at the spectacle, the others’ mouths were set in a grim line.

‘Traitors,’ one of them hissed, and had spit onto the ground.

Draco hadn’t known what to do then. The cries from the inside of the cottage were weakening and fading, he found he was more curious than disturbed by the screams, merely wondering when they would stop. None of those around him seemed distressed either-some of them were grinning, in fact, relishing the sound of a cruel death. Draco didn’t grin, but he bore the fading screams silently until they ended, feeling neither alarm nor grief at the fate of these people he didn’t know. Why should he? The man had said they were traitors, after all...

He looked up at his father. His face was also obscured by his hood, but there was no mistaking the feral grin on his face. Draco should have been frightened. He should have felt compassion. He had felt nothing.

By the time the screams were long gone and the little cottage collapsed into a smoldering heap of ash and stone, embers glowing threateningly on the ground, he felt he had seen enough and wanted to go home. The men around him seemed satisfied, and after marking the black sky with the Dark Lord's mark they apparated away, leaving himself and his father alone in the forest, breathing in the acrid smoke. Lucius had explained to him why they had killed the family inside but he had hardly heard him and even now he could not remember the reason his father had given.

Draco blinked and stared straight ahead, counting his footsteps. His mother had said nothing when they returned, but he had sensed she had known where they had gone, what they had done. He had automatically bid them good night like the dutiful son he was and went to his room to sleep a dreamless sleep.

He blinked again, wrapping his scarf more securely around his neck. That memory had come out of nowhere. He hated that feeling, when memories he didn't know he had just floated back up to the surface. Had he repressed it? He had read something about repressed memories in one of the books in his father's library once. And he had heard Granger speaking about it to Potter once in third year; just in passing, when they had come across each other in the library.

That had been sometime after the incident between himself and the Mudblood, when she had slapped him for the first time. He'd been too proud and mortified to acknowledge her much afterward, only had sent her a brief sneer and swept away, his ears burning with hate and shame as he heard Potter mutter something and her high peals of laughter followed him for the rest of the day.

Now that he thought on it, he realized he never had gotten back at her for that slap.

There had been so many opportunities: over the summer at the Quidditch World Cup, Fifth-year with the Inquisitor Squad, he surely could have used his power to lure her into trouble, and well, last year had not been enough. He supposed he had been too embarrassed at having been bested (yet again) by her. Their third year had been a revelation for him—that had been the year he realized how strong she was. Not only was she the most intelligent witch he'd ever met, but she certainly could dole out a little serving of humility when the calling she'd finally had enough of his taunts and jeers and had lashed out with her fist had both astounded and infuriated him.

He had revisited the memory of her punch for days after, still shocked to see that the famously prim Granger had true bite to her, after all. Before, she'd just made sarcastic comments back at him or rolled her eyes and turned her back, but that punch was a total surprise and he'd found himself intrigued by her since then, refusing to admit for the longest time after that the memory of her viciousness was troublingly arousing, and that he'd masturbated to multiple fantasies in the years since of ways he might stoke and dominate that delicious little temper of hers.

I'll break you like a twig, he thought, desire and anticipation curling inside him. *I'll leash that temper of yours, Granger.*

He couldn't wait to see her at the ball. She would be unaware and probably too preoccupied with Potter to see what was really going on. All for the better. He'd have his chance to strike and be one step closer to his goal.

Count your days of freedom, little bird, he thought, smiling again. I'm coming for you.

"Are you absolutely sure you've got everything ready?" Ginny asked for what seemed to Hermione like the millionth time.

Hermione looked up from her Ancient Runes textbook and glared at her redheaded friend.

"Quite. Now ask me again and I'll hex you."

Ginny tossed her long hair over her shoulder and smiled. "You'd never."

"Don't tempt me," Hermione warned absently, her nose back inside her book. Ginny laughed and gave her friend a squeeze on the shoulder and left.

As soon as Hermione heard the door slam she tossed her book aside and sat down in front of the fireplace, kicking off her shoes. Dinner wasn't for another hour and she intended to take advantage of that to take a much-needed nap.

The Halloween ball was in two days' time and every one of her and Neville's waking moments (outside of classes and homework) had been dedicated to making sure everything was going according to plan. Due to the stress, Neville had got a cold and was taking the day off from his classes. Remembering that he hadn't been to lunch, she supposed she would have to check on him before dinner to make sure he was alright.

She awoke from her nap a while later, a small frown gracing her features from the remnants of the dream she had been having still pulsing in her mind. She shook her head faintly and sat up from her curled position by the fire, stretching slowly to undo the kinks in her spine.

It's been some time since I've had a nightmare. The thought was comforting.

And a good thing it was, too. Now that she was able to get the rest she needed, her brain was finally waking up from its trance for the past several months. Ron's confrontation had helped as well; she hadn't known how badly she'd needed that. And her reconciliation with Harry. Things were running smoothly again between both of them after she had forgiven him. It seemed he still felt guilty, though, for since she had taken him back he was suddenly very protective of her (more than he had been beforehand) and whenever they were together, he would be extra careful and gentle with her as though she were some delicate glass figurine. It was both sweet and aggravating.

His confession of being in love with her had very much been on her mind for days since he had said it. To think he'd loved her all this time! It made her blush, both flattered and embarrassed. She had almost said it back, but didn't, and wasn't sure why.

That she felt love for Harry was a no brainer. She had come to care for him more than she cared about her other friends. He was brave and selfless at times and utterly clueless at others. He was kind and intelligent, funny and attractive, though she'd never allowed herself to think too much on that last one until not too long ago, fearing it would ruin their friendship.

Now look where we are.

Whether the love she felt for him was the same sort he felt for her, she wasn't sure yet. He had always been a friend-and she had pushed away that little voice inside her head that had sometimes wondered what it might like to be more than that. In Year 4 the daunting fear of the Triwizard Tournament had let that voice become a little louder, and she had hidden her disappointment well when he'd crushed on Cho Chang. But sometimes their eyes would meet and she would catch something in his gaze that was fleeting and warmed her to her toes-it happened here and there, and sometimes his gaze would linger on her as they'd talk and she'd asked herself later if she had imagined it and dared wonder if he felt it, too.

When he'd asked her to go to the Yule Ball with him last year, she had been relieved, as she hadn't been sure if she'd ever have worked up the courage to ask him herself-especially with Malfoy always plaguing her mind.

Being with Harry felt natural. They'd been friends for years, now, so she guessed that played a part. She only wished Malfoy hadn't been around to taint the beginning of their relationship as he had tried so hard to do.

Hermione got up and dressed quickly, glanced at her clock. Dinner was coming up. She'd told Harry and Ron she'd meet them there.

At the mention of Harry, her stomach did a funny flip and she paused, frowning.

That's new.

Before she could dwell on it further, she hurried out of her room, excited again at remembering that the Malfoy nightmares were becoming less and less.

She entered the common room and stopped at Neville's door, rapping on the mahogany with her knuckles.

"If this has anything to do with the ball, you're not welcome," came Neville's groggy voice from the other side of the door. He opened it anyway, blinking blearily at Hermione, who smiled at him.

"It's your lucky day, then," she said. "Just popping in to make sure you're alright." She slipped past him and made herself comfortable on the plush carpet.

"Do come in, by all means," he muttered, shutting the door behind her.

"You've seen better days," she remarked honestly, tapping her chin with her finger. "Have you taken any potions?"

Neville nodded, yawning, and shuffled over to his dresser.

"Dinner is soon, you know. You should eat something."

Neville yawned. "Ugh. Give me a moment, then."

"I suppose you're not up for patrols tonight?" Hermione asked.

"Sorry but no. This headache's been bothering me all day," he said. 'All these Head duties are driving me up the wall,' he grumbled, searching for a clean set of robes. "And this Ball has got me barking mad. Thank Merlin it's almost over."

"Cheers," Hermione snickered, and he went into his bathroom to dress.

“Should I wait for you, or do you want privacy?” she called.

“Might as well wait so we can walk down together,” his voice was muffled by the walls separating them.

A few minutes later, he emerged, looking fresh and fully awake.

“Let’s away,” he warbled in a pathetically childish voice and offered her his hand to help her stand.

“Let’s,” she echoed, hiding her laugh, and together, they walked down to the Great Hall.

The Headmistress looked over her pupils, raising her hands for their attention.

Almost immediately, the din and clatter died down, and the students turned their faces towards her, awaiting her announcement.

“Good evening,” she began, and she could practically sense their anticipation; they knew what she was going to talk about.

“As you may all know, the Halloween Masquerade Ball is the day after tomorrow.” She raised her hand once more to quell the animated whispers that rose at once.

“And while I know that you are all respectable and will be on your best behavior that night,” her stern, withering glare swept across the room, “Your Head Boy and Girl and I have composed a small list of rules for the occasion.”

“First, masks are allowed, but no tomfoolery will be. Pranks of any sort will not be tolerated. All students are required to wear their masks until midnight when we will unmask. The ball will begin promptly at nine pm and will end after midnight. I don’t think I need remind you that if any tricks are pulled that night, *there will be no Christmas Ball in December*. Goodnight.” And with a warning quiver of her lip and a whisk of her robes, she left.

At once the students stood to go to their friends and discuss costumes and masks and such, filling the Great Hall once more with their noise.

Harry, who had sat with his arm tenderly wrapped around Hermione’s waist, turned to face her.

“Well, what do you say, Little Red?” he asked, a teasing twinkle in his eye. “Shall I walk you to your dorm?”

Hermione smiled at him. “That shouldn’t be necessary, noble Huntsman,” she chimed, “there are no wolves lurking about here.”

Harry squeezed her waist and pecked her on the cheek. Hermione laughed, flushed.

“Well, I’ve got to stay in shape somehow,” he chuckled, and together they made their way down the hall, bumping into Ron along the way.

“Where’ve you been, mate?” Harry asked. “We were waiting for you.”

Ron shrugged. "I was studying for an exam, and I guess I got distracted."

Hermione gaped. "**You?** *Studying?*"

Ron flushed. "Don't tell me I missed dinner?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

Harry and Hermione gestured to the flow of students leaving the hall.

Ron swore.

"Guess I'll just nick something from the kitchens," he resolved, and set off at a fast clip, but not before giving Hermione a quick hug and Harry a slap on the shoulder for not having alerted him to come down to dinner.

Once she was in the Head Common Room and Harry had left, Hermione slipped off her shoes and made her way over to her room, loosening her tie along the way.

"Hey, someone sent you something."

She jumped at hearing Neville's voice come from behind her but turned quickly to peer curiously at her friend.

Neville had just come out of his room and was holding a small, sealed scroll towards her. Hermione took it and frowned at the seal. No one she knew used seals on their post.

"When did this arrive?"

"A minute or two before you did."

"Did you recognize the owl?"

Neville rubbed the back of his head. "Um, well, it was white..."

"Hedwig?"

"No, definitely not."

Hermione nodded before wishing Neville a good night and shutting herself in her room. She left the little scroll on her four-poster bed as she changed into her pajamas, dismissing it as just a note from another student. Perhaps it was an inquiry about the ball, or another schedule change request. Something of that sort.

But that didn't explain the seal. She regarded it curiously. It was a blood-red color, and stamped into it was the face of a wolf, smiling frighteningly up at her. It made the hairs on her arms and neck stand on end, but she disregarded this as well and broke it, unrolling the bit of parchment.

Save the last dance for me.

That was all it said.

7. The First Step

“You look stunning, Ginny,” Hermione sighed as she gazed at her friend.

With her red hair softly curled and left hanging down her front, and her teal ruched gown that was detailed with layers of shiny, lightly coloured sequins and a trailing mermaid tail made of an aqua tulle, Ginny Weasley truly looked like a mermaid. Or, well, the Muggle version of a mermaid, for the actual magical mermaid looked vastly different.

Ginny turned away from her standard Hogwarts vanity, and threw her brush playfully at Hermione, who with a flick of her wand transformed it into a small bird that began to fly eagerly around the room.

“So do you,” Ginny stated matter-of-factly. “You look absolutely beautiful. Fairy-tale like, even. Or—”

“Stop, stop!” Hermione protested, blushing. “I’m not even remotely close to beautiful, but thank you for your input. What?” she added when she saw how Ginny was scowling at her.

“Don’t be silly, of course you are.” She quickly snatched Hermione’s arm and pulled her over to the vanity, where they gazed at Hermione’s reflection.

“I look normal,” Hermione said indifferently.

Ginny made a hissing noise between her teeth.

“Don’t make me hex you,” she mocked, and lightly held Hermione’s chin, turning her back to her own reflection.

“Look at yourself.”

Hermione looked.

She looked at her dress first, her beautiful white dress. It was made of soft chiffon that flowed freely around her in a full skirt. The built-in corset crushed her breasts to her chest, but she had spent several minutes adjusting that so she wouldn’t be revealing anything more than she was comfortable with. The dress had long, peasant-style sheer sleeves that went up to her wrists.

A brilliant, deep scarlet, the cloak was made of fine silk, and the inside was lined with a warmer fabric so she wouldn’t get cold. The hood was large, enough to cover not on her head but about half of her face, and a fat red ribbon securely held the cloak in place just above the hollow of her throat. Her hair was swept away from her face and artfully clasped at the back of her head, where her beautiful curls fell down her back. Seeing as it was a Masquerade ball, Hermione had taken one little moment of vanity to spell her hair black for the evening. Her mask was made of an ivory-painted wire that had been formed into beautiful, tiny little intricate designs that adorned her face, but did not really hide it.

Hermione couldn’t really recognize herself, but she supposed it all had to do with the cloak and her mask. She had to admit she looked quite agreeable, but she could not see herself as

beautiful.

"You're like Snow White, but with brains," Ginny said softly.

Hermione raised her brow at her friend. "How do you know who Snow White is?"

"I nicked your copy of the Grimm fairytales over the summer," Ginny replied archly. "Dad found me reading it, and we did some research in our spare time."

Hermione laughed. "If you'd asked I'd have let you have it. I've got another copy."

"It's alright," Ginny said. "Dad found out there's loads of Muggle movies on those fairytales and he's been wanting to watch them since."

"Really?" Hermione said. "I could help get them for you-I've got a few of them at home."

"Don't encourage his obsession!" Ginny said, laughing. "Mum found a few Muggle films he's already got but he doesn't have anything to watch them with."

"All the same, Harry is one lucky bloke," Ginny teased as she applied some lip gloss.

"What about your date?" Hermione asked, fighting to conceal the blush on her cheeks and wondering at the same time if she should drag out her family's old DVD player from the garage to give to Mr. Weasley.

"I haven't got one," Ginny grinned. "Having a date at these sorts of events is ever so dull; you're tied to that one person for the entire night and can rarely dance with anyone else. I don't need some boy to make my night; I can have fun by myself."

"Having a date isn't all that dreadful," Hermione countered. "Not if you like the person."

"It's different for you and Harry," Ginny waved her hand dismissively. "You're both dead gone on each other, but it's not that easy for the rest of us."

"Ginny..." Hermione trailed off, she didn't know what to say. Was Ginny jealous?

As if she had read her mind, Ginny talked on.

"I'm not jealous," she said, "Harry is like a brother to me. I only envy the type of relationship you both have. I wish I could find something like that."

"I'm confident you will," Hermione said. "To be honest, sometimes I wonder whether I really do love Harry," she confessed quietly.

Ginny appeared scandalized.

"Why?" she breathed.

Hermione let out a small desperate moan. "It's just-we're so young! Not even out of school, and I'm afraid of things between us getting serious and I'm not ready for that yet and I'm scared I might be confusing my feelings for him as love since we've been through so much and he's always been like a brother to me, maybe more and it's the first relationship I've ever been in!" she paused to gasp for breath. "What if it's not meant to be?" she asked softly. "What if it's all in our heads?"

Ginny sat down on the bed beside Hermione, drawing her hands into her lap.

“No one’s pressuring you two to be together, Hermione,” she said slowly. “Much less to be married or do anything you’re not comfortable with. You’re young and you’ve got plenty of time to figure it out. It isn’t a race. If it doesn’t work out, then there’s nothing you can do about it. Merlin knows you two love each other enough to never stop being friends.”

She placed a small kiss on the other witches’ flushed forehead, who gave her a grateful hug.

“Try not to overthink it so much,” Ginny said.

Hermione sighed. “That’s all I ever do.”

They had truly outdone themselves.

The Great Hall was nearly unrecognizable in its newfound splendor. It was almost as though he’d been transported into one of his great-grandfather’s old photographs (from the years he had lived in Wizarding Paris) of an opulent opera theatre; all was golden and polished and bright. The floors were white marble, the gleaming walls adorned with ornate mirrors and gilded candlesticks and torches. The tables and chairs were beautifully decorated with blood-red and golden orange leaves artfully arranged in brass vases.

Professor Flitwick had volunteered to oversee the food table to make sure nothing would be tampered with. Though the table was a little taller than him he used this to his advantage. Now and then someone might linger too close or too long by the punch and they would be startled by his jumping forward and his suspicious cry of, “Ah-ha!”

He recognized so many faces but none recognized him. He saw Pansy with Blaise, who gave him a discreet nod of the head and moved along. He also saw Weasley walking by with a heavy plate of food in each hand, probably searching for a good table where he could sit and gorge himself as usual.

Aside from that it truly was as if he’d been sent back in time to one of the ancient yet still active opera houses he had once visited on a trip with his parents.

He stood in the back, in the shadow of one of the many pillars that were scattered about the hall, waiting.

He couldn’t help but revel in the pride he felt at the thought that Granger was the brains behind this. The students that had arrived so far simply gaped at their surroundings as they adjusted their masks.

He shifted on his feet, ever so patient. His hands curled and uncurled in anticipation.

Getting in had been easy. Child’s play, even. The harder part would be going about unnoticed and departing from this heavily protected castle.

He wasn’t exactly hiding, but one would have to look very closely in order to see him properly. And if anyone *were* to see him, they wouldn’t be able to see very well past his grinning wolf mask.

To be honest, he couldn't tell whether the mask was grinning or snarling, by the way the ends of its mouth pulled up to its eyes on both sides of its face, revealing sharp, gleaming teeth. Regardless, the mask had the desired effect on those who had dared to look at it. Those who did didn't even look at *him*, so caught were they in the masks' unsettling expression, in its eerie yellow eyes, and they would look away as quickly as their eyes had landed on him. That was just the way he wanted it. It wouldn't do to be discovered here. If anyone found out his identity, all his efforts for his big surprise would be ruined.

He wore charcoal grey robes over an all-black suit and had donned specially made gloves with real wolves' claws attached to each finger of both hands.

He had made sure his costume covered enough of him so he would not be recognized. His hood covered his hair, and his mask and cloak concealed the paleness of his eyes and skin.

The minutes crawled past and more and more students began to arrive, each pair or the single ones would march proudly down the stairs, displaying their attire and reveling in the exquisite beauty of the transformed Great Hall. He stood and watched, his eyes never once straying from that grand staircase as the spaces filled around him. He was aware of a few pairs of eyes on him but knew the attention was focused on his mask, so he stood his ground and kept watching. Waiting. He wasn't sure how long he'd been standing there, but he knew he would stay there for as long as it would take.

"You remember what to do," Professor McGonagall said curtly to Hermione, who nodded and stood beside Neville at the entrance doors.

"Ready?" she asked, smiling softly at him.

"Is this *absolutely* necessary?" Neville asked, straightening his feathered mask. Though he had (begrudgingly) accompanied Hermione to the costume shop in Hogsmeade and had tried on a costume or two, he had ultimately decided to wear his best black robes and a standard feathered mask, much to Hermione's amusement. Luna didn't seem to mind at all. If anything, her overly elaborate costume made up for Neville's lack of one, so grand and overdone and so Luna-ish it was.

"Yes, it is," Hermione sighed. "Don't make it out to be such a bad thing, now. At least you didn't have to dance with *Malfoy*."

He started and watched her carefully after this last sentence. This was the first time she had mentioned the abominable Slytherin without him bringing it up first, and he was surprised at how calm she looked.

"He didn't seem all that bad a dancer," he commented as innocently as he could.

Hermione snorted.

"Of course he was a good dancer," she said bitterly. "He was trained by some famous French dancer. 'Malfoys always have the best,'" she mocked, and abruptly fell silent, though it had been clear she was going to say something else on the matter.

He saw the frown on her face and her lips were parted; although he didn't know it, she was repeating to herself what she had just said-what she had only just remembered *he* had said.

How could she have forgotten he had said that? The way he had looked at her then—though she had ignored his gaze, there was no denying the hungry, possessive look in his eyes, or the way his grip on her waist had tightened then, and he had pulled her closer so that their bodies pressed together.

She shook her head, blinking several times to rid herself of the memory. No. She couldn't let herself dwell on this. He was gone, and she was safe here.

Safe.

He would be caught and brought to justice, and she would be fine.

"Hermione?"

Neville's concerned voice brought her back to the present, and her eyes flew up to meet his.

"Are you okay?" he asked, feeling her forehead. "You were out of it for a minute."

"I'm fine," Hermione said, but her mouth was so dry her voice had not carried past her lips.

Licking her lips, she tried again.

"I'm fine," she said.

The enchanted ceiling had darkened considerably; dark clouds hung closely above everyone's heads, and a full, eerily glowing moon peeked out at them from behind them.

It was time.

The Headmistress stepped up from her perch on the grand staircase, and began to go on about one thing or another. He wasn't listening to her at all, didn't need to, really, his ears were trained for two words only.

"...and your Head Girl, Miss Hermione Granger," said the old woman, and his eyes sharpened their focus as the doors opened and two figures stepped through and began to make their way down the steps.

He could easily tell it was Longbottom behind that mask, that loping gait was enough to give him away.

His eyes swiveled to the side and he let out a quiet purr when he saw her.

He took in her outfit and grinned beneath his mask, running his tongue over his teeth.

Their costumes matched. Satisfaction rang through him. This must mean something.

He had gone out on a limb when he'd gotten the costume and sent the note with that seal. It certainly was fitting enough—he was the ravenous wolf come to seize his innocent little lamb, but this was just as good, or even better.

No doubt Saint Potter was dressed as the noble Huntsman who aided Little Darling Red in her escape from the Big Bad Wolf.

But there would be no escape here for Little Red. Her huntsman would not suspect a thing.

I'm going to get my claws into you. You won't get away this time.

This was only the first step to her capture.

He raised his eyes to drink her in again. She looked divine-mouthwatering, even. She was smiling and had her arm linked with Longbottom's. They stood quite close, he was aware of the aura of intimacy that surrounded them, and he did not like it at all. His eyes narrowed and a slight sneer formed on his lips as he watched them take their place at the center of the floor, waiting for the music to begin.

When they began to dance, he noticed with smug satisfaction that by far, he was the better dancer. Longbottom was by no means a disgrace, but he was lacking in elegance and posture. This observation took him all of five seconds before he attached his eyes back on the hooded beauty; only for this dance she had lowered said hood. Her curls were free now and flowed around her as she and her partner waltzed. It had grown longer, but what caught him off guard was the color.

Her once honey-brown tresses were now a midnight black.

What is this? He thought angrily, clenching his fists.

He could not deny that she did look beautiful with a different color, but it was not like her. Brown was her natural color and brown it would stay as soon as he had her. She and Longbottom were whispering to each other and he noticed with rising irritation that she was leaning into him, and his arms were wrapped snugly about her waist and how easily their hands met in the air. There was light applause as other couples began to break into the dance floor, but he paid them no mind. He only had eyes for her.

He hadn't known what to expect when he came here. He had spent hours thinking, wondering about her. Would she be a sorry, frightened mess? Afraid to step into shadows, the mere mention of his name would make her jump? No, that didn't seem quite right. Maybe for a while, but she was strong after all, and seeing as she had her two imbeciles still with her, they would see to her pulling through.

But he hadn't been expecting this.

She seemed fine. Absolutely fine. Her face expressed not a flicker of pain or some deeply hidden fear and guilt. She looked beautiful and carefree and she was just doting on that sniveling Longbottom, her eyes shining like stars as she spoke to him, how she tweaked his nose playfully and laughed when he muttered something into her ear, her beautiful laugh ringing in his ears. He closed his eyes when he heard it, and replayed it in his mind several times. It had been so very long since he had last heard it.

The music ended then, and he watched as she curtsied to her partner, who bowed deeply, earning a giggle from her, which enraged him. The witch gave him a kiss on the cheek and the wizard teasingly pulled on a curl. What were those two playing at? He glared at Longbottom as he walked away and blended into the throng around them. They seemed much too close to be simply friends; everything he had seen attested them being more than that, and it made him see red. But what about Potter?

As if on cue, Potter strode up then and took her hand, kissing it lightly. He watched closely as she smiled at him and they began to dance to the song that had just begun to play. Potter looked every bit the rustic Huntsman as he led her into another waltz, mumbling things into the crook of her neck as she looked up at him. She smiled every now and then, but there were no lovely giggles or playful tweaks of the nose. He tipped his head and watched them as they moved around on the dance floor. The shine in her eyes was brighter as she looked at Potter—she was blushing as they spoke and he picked up on how tightly she held Potter's hand and how her fingers dug into his shoulder, the tips going white from the pressure. Potter lifted and twirled her capably, she was smiling as he put her down and took his hand again.

The dance ended and Potter leaned down and gave her a chaste kiss on her lips, which had Draco seething from where he stood. She sighed into the kiss and he deepened it for a moment before pulling away, smiling wolfishly at her. She blushed and began to pull away but he gently brought her back and placed another kiss on her lips, the loud smack it produced made her blush even harder. They broke apart and got off the dance floor, heading to their table.

And Draco stood there in the shadows, aroused, jealous, rage building inside him by the second.

How badly he wanted to go over there and rip Potter's hands off her. He wanted to Stun her and take her away immediately to where she belonged and would give no more pieces of her heart away.

The ball went on in this manner with him lurking in the backdrop, watching her and waiting for his chance.

She spent most of the night with Potter, but occasionally Longbottom or Weasley or some other dunce would come along and whisk her away for their share of the Gryffindor Princess. He made sure to move around and in a specific manner so as not to draw too much attention to himself as he followed her around the ballroom.

He'd come very nearly close to approaching her after she'd finished a conversation with the female Weasley and had gone over to the refreshment table to serve herself some punch. The table was deserted, for nearly everyone was dancing by now. He'd thanked Salazaar, and was about to move in when that blasted Lovegood girl appeared out of nowhere and attached herself to Granger's side.

On the rare occasion he had not been watching Granger, he'd seen Lovegood and Longbottom together frequently throughout the night. He wondered if they were in a relationship. Did Lovegood know how Granger was almost throwing herself at Longbottom? Anger and jealousy rose up in his chest, clawing at his insides, and he found he was furious with himself for not having stationed a spy in the school while he was gone to watch Granger. He might just have asked Blaise from the start, though he was sure that Blaise would have been annoyed by the request. What if she'd broken things with Potter after he'd left, and started something with Longbottom? Clearly though, she and Potter must have got back together at one point, but that did not answer his question on why Longbottom and Granger were being so damned friendly towards one another.

Damn it all, Granger was *his*, and no one could ever pretend or even attempt to steal her heart, for it was *his* for the taking.

He wondered if she had fucked Potter or Longbottom.

This thought brought up images in his mind of her lying beneath some undeserving idiot, panting and moaning with lust, and the small glass he'd been holding shattered in his grip, dripping punch onto his clothing.

So Granger was playing the whore now, was she?

She'd given what was rightfully his to some other undeserving ass?

Well.

Well.

He eyed her where she stood, with her idiot Gryffindors, Potter's arm about her waist and Longbottom's hand on her delicate shoulder, with Weasely pouring her more punch, and released the bloodied glass shards he still held in his hand, watching as they clinked onto the floor, spattering tiny droplets of blood around his feet.

The night was almost over, and he was burning with anticipation. He needed to make his move.

Hermione looked happily around the ballroom, drinking in the evening's success. She waved to Ginny, who winked at her from where she stood with Terry Boot, and smiled at Luna, who talking animatedly to two other Ravenclaws Hermione did not recognize. Hermione supposed she was telling them all about her costume. Luna had come dressed up as a Wrydinger, some sort of variation of the Blast-Ended Skrewt, only less vicious, apparently. She loved seeing how everyone else had come dressed up; Lavender Brown was a unicorn, Seamus Finnegan had come dressed entirely in green and had developed some sort of charm that made a golden dust trail appear behind him whenever he moved. Millicent Bulstrode had come dressed as a swan; in Hermione's opinion, she looked perfectly lovely, and sadly she wondered why no one had asked her to dance yet.

She caught a glimpse of a fox mask as she swept her eyes back, but when she looked again, it was gone. A funny little jolt shot through her nerves and she found her hands were sweaty. Suddenly she remembered what she'd been meaning to bring up to Harry.

She grabbed his arm and pulled him away from their small group. Harry stumbled a bit, but righted himself immediately and raised his brows at her.

"You didn't have to request for me to save you the last dance, you know," she said, "I would have done it even if you hadn't asked."

Harry tilted his head.

"Request? What are you talking about?" he asked.

"The note," Hermione explained. "Someone sent me a note that said to save them the last dance, only it wasn't signed or anything, so I assumed it was from you."

He shook his head, rubbing at a spot below his ear. "Hermione, I didn't send you a note."

Hermione frowned. "Then who could it have been from?"

"Sounds like you've got a secret admirer," Harry teased, smiling.

"Oh, don't," she said, laughing.

He pulled her closer to him, kissing her on the lips.

"I dare say there's quite a few blokes out there tonight who've had their eyes on you all night," he whispered, smiling.

Hermione gulped at his words, blushing. But she placed her palms on his cheeks and stared into his bright eyes, smiling softly.

"You're the only one that matters," she whispered back.

His face split into a grin and before she knew it, he had caught her about the waist and was twirling her in the air, causing shrieks and bubbly laughter to spill past her lips.

"Don't you ever do that again," she gasped once he put her back down.

"Shit-I didn't mean to frighten you," he said quickly. "Sorry, I just got caught up in what you said."

"It's all right," Hermione admonished. "But maybe next time, a warning beforehand would be nice." She swatted him playfully on the arm.

He laughed.

It was nearly midnight.

It was time.

He made his way towards them, striding confidently.

He nodded to Potter and stepped in front of her. She regarded him with curious eyes, flinched at the mask, and then he saw something click in her mind.

"You're the one who sent me the note," she said.

He nodded.

"Do I know you?"

Another nod.

He held out his hand. She eyed his unique gloves warily and hesitated. Potter nudged her, biting his lip to hold back a grin.

"What a coincidence," he said pleasantly. 'Our costumes all match.' Turning to Hermione, he gave her another kiss. "Go on," he whispered quietly. "I'll be around."

She leaned into his touch for a second and then, straightening her mask, she took the offered hand, staring into the masks' eyes brazenly.

Harry went into the throng of dancers, probably in search of Ron. She watched him go and wished he had stayed.

The stranger led her to the edge of the room, not letting go of her hand all the while. The band was just starting up a new song-the wolf bowed to her and held out his hand-she took it warily and they began to dance.

Neither said anything for a moment.

She tried peering through the mask to get a better look at her partner's eyes, but her efforts proved fruitless. His eyes were carefully hidden by the frightening mask. Though she tried not to look at it too much, she found herself drawn to it.

"Don't look so frightened," came his voice, and she jumped, because she had not expected him to speak and because his voice seemed so very familiar, yet she could not place to whom it belonged.

"With a mask like that, it's hard not to be," she muttered, cheeks flaming.

"Rest assured, Little Red, I will not eat you," came his voice, both light and serious at the same time. "At least, not yet."

She frowned.

"Who are you?"

"A wolf. I thought it was obvious." He chuckled.

"A jokester, too," she said dryly. "How fortunate. Why won't you tell me who you are?"

The wolf looked down at the floor coyly. "What if I told you I was shy?"

"Well, I guess I'd respect that, then," she said. "But why would you want to dance with me?"

The wolf twirled her and stepped in closer as she stepped back in. "Maybe I've had my eye on you for a while."

"Oh." She wasn't sure how she felt about that.

"Maybe I think you're beautiful and wanted to dance with you," he added. "Is that so hard to conceive?"

Hermione blushed and looked down. "I guess you're glad you sent me that note."

"Extremely so. You look absolutely mouth-watering, and I haven't had a decent meal in quite a while," he breathed into her ear, his lips barely brushing against her skin.

She pushed at his chest. "Now you're being inappropriate. Let me go," she demanded, trying to pull away, but he caught her and placed a calming hand on her arm. She paused, glaring at the stranger.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was merely trying to pay you a compliment."

"You already did. You didn't have to push it further," she said.

He pulled the reluctant witch back to him and they stepped back into the dance. Hermione felt uneasy with what had just happened and more so due to the fact that she had just realized that they were in a secluded corner of the room, hidden in shadows. A shiver ran down her spine.

It was nearly midnight.

"I should go," she said as the dance ended, pulling out of his reach.

"Don't go." She was surprised at the tone of his voice-it sounded so much harsher than it had a moment before.

"Why not?" she asked, crossing her arms.

"You wanted to know who I am, didn't you?"

The unmasking is about to take place, "she said." I'd like to be with my boyfriend by the time that comes if you don't mind. Or you can join us, and I'll found out who you are then."

"I do mind," he said, stepping forward. "I'm shy, remember?"

"Somehow, I'm not sure I believe that," Hermione said, taking a step back.

"It's almost time," he said quietly. "Unmask me, then you can go."

Looking at him, she tried to come to a decision. Sure, it would be easier to just walk away and put this odd incident out of her mind, but she couldn't deny the burning curiosity inside of her that demanded to know who this man was. It was part of her nature, she *had* to know everything. And something about him really did seem familiar...

So she walked forward carefully; the others were already counting down the final seconds until midnight, each number yelled out in unison crashed in her ears.

"Five!"

She raised her hands and he leaned forward, bending down slightly so she could reach better.

"Four!"

Her fingers found the ribbon that held the mask in place, and slowly unraveled them.

"Three!"

It was coming off now, she didn't know why her hands were shaking, or why there was a small voice inside her head commanding her to stop at once and run away.

Run away.

"Two!"

Run away!

She pulled it off entirely as the crowd shouted: "One!" She faintly heard their cheers and the music start up again, but none of that really registered in her mind, for she was staring at a ghost.

Handsome face, strong, chiseled jaw, arrogant smirk, light hair, and those eyes.

Automatically she stumbled back a few steps in her alarm, and he followed, his grin growing wider, almost to the point where it resembled the grin on his masks' face.

*Not possible, she thought. He left, he disappeared, he can't be **here**.*

All these thoughts raced through her mind, and questions popped up faster than lightning, crowding her mind, but only one word left her mouth.

Not a word, really, a name.

"Cormac?"

8. I Love You

“Missed me?” he asked, grinning and spreading his arms out, his palms open.

Hermione shook her head, her lips parted in surprise. His smile withered. “Well, that’s insulting,” he said lightly.

“Why should I be happy to see you again after what you did to me?” Hermione said angrily.

“You’re too right, Granger.” He looked a little sheepish, to Hermione’s relief.

“It’s just— How... I thought you transferred!”

“I did,” he said. “But I had unfinished business here, so I had to come back.”

“Why tonight of all nights?” she asked.

He grinned. “Couldn’t risk not seeing you,” he said, and there was something serious and unidentifiable in his eyes as he looked at her. “You’re part of the reason I came back.”

“Why did you?” Hermione asked, narrowing her eyes.

“I never did apologize for it, did I?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “But you didn’t have to come all the way out here to do that when you weren’t sure how I’d react to seeing you again. A letter would have been enough.”

“Well.” He dug his hands in his pockets and took another few steps closer to close the space in between them.

She didn’t know what to do; he was cornering her into the wall. She placed her palms on the wall behind her, ready to grab her wand from her pocket at a moment’s notice. She stared up into his eyes, and gasped upon finding his face so close to her own.

“Is *this* how you choose to apologize?” she hissed.

Cormac shrugged. “People have their own ways of doing things.”

Hermione pressed herself into the wall more deeply to avoid him. “You’ve got a funny way of apologizing. Get away from me.”

“Oh, Granger, give me credit,” he chuckled. “At least I’m actually *doing* it.”

Upon this pause, he took his time looking her over from head to toe, drinking in her exquisite appearance. Hermione’s face was on fire with the intensity of her blush.

“Potter is one lucky man,” he commented softly, speaking more to himself than to her. He raised a hand and traced his fingers over her trembling lips. Hermione jerked away, glaring at him. “I’d give anything for another taste...” he whispered.

Another?

Warning bells were ringing in her head. Something wasn't right here. Hermione began to reach for her wand.

He seemed to have made up his mind and was leaning in closer; her breaths quickened and she stared wide-eyed at him in incredulity at his nerve. Hermione's heart caught in her throat. Moving jerkily out of fear, she reached up and shoved him hard.

"Stop it!"

He quickly straightened and took one step back, though it seemed to have taken quite a bit of effort to do so. His hands were at his sides once more and he was a respectable distance away, and though his face was void of emotion, she could feel the anger coming from him. Confusion wrapped its sticky arms around her once more and she wondered why he could possibly be angry right now. What was going on?

"I'm sorry," he ground out, running a hand through his hair as she stepped further away from him, grasping her wand.

"Is this a habit of yours, molesting me at dances?" she asked, her voice acidic.

"Oh, but you're so tempting," he said huskily, and she glared at him.

"Goodbye," she tucked her wand back into its pocket in her cloak and began to walk away.

"No," he said, and quickly, he snatched her arm and brought her back.

"How dare you-!"

He placed a finger on her lips, silencing the enraged witch.

"This isn't goodbye, Granger," he said gravely. "At least, not yet."

"And what is that supposed to mean?" she huffed, yanking her arm out of his hold.

"When is the next trip to Hogsmeade?" he asked suddenly, looking around them. He was running out of time.

"In a week," she answered testily. "Why?"

"Because I need to tell you something, and it can't be done here," he said.

She gestured to the space around them. "What's wrong with here?"

He crossed his arms and smirked, leaning against the wall. "Maybe I just want to see you again."

"Maybe I don't," she said, glaring.

"It's not a date or anything like that," he said impatiently, but then cocked his brow at her, smiling a crooked smile. "Unless you want it to be."

"I'm in a relationship, you insufferable arse," she spat.

He mockingly held up his hands in surrender and hung his head, shaking with laughter.

"So be it," he looked back up at her, "but I've important information I cannot relay here."

"Why not?" Hermione asked. "And information on what, exactly?"

“On the previous Head Boy,” he said, watching the color drain from her face.

“Why should I care about him?” she asked, feigning indifference.

“Because he threatened me after my incident at the Ball last year, and I generally got the idea that you are in danger.”

Hermione frowned. “He forced you to move, didn’t he?”

Cormac said nothing; he only looked at her.

“Do whatever you have to do, but I don’t want anyone else tagging along,” he instructed. “I’m already compromising my safety and yours by being here. Meet me at the Shrieking Shack.”

With that, he turned to leave, but she grabbed his arm.

“Wait—” she began, but he cut her off again.

“I can’t tell you any more, Granger. I’ve got to go now.”

“How do I know I can trust you?” she asked him softly, not relinquishing her hold on his arm.

“You don’t,” he said. “But I did apologize, and I hope that helps. You’ll just have to trust me on this one.” With that, he brushed off her arm and left, pulling his mask back on.

“Wait-!” she called, going after him, plunging back into the mass of magic folk, who were still celebrating the unmasking.

She could see flashes of him every now and then as she tailed him as best as she could, reaching out to grasp at his robe, his arm, anything. She had more questions, and by Jove, he wasn’t going to leave her like this.

She wove through the throng of moving bodies, narrowly avoiding being hit several times by a waving arm or a moving passerby. Several times she had to duck to the side to evade having punch spilled on her dress.

He was uncommonly fast-either that or she was out of shape. With every step she took, she could sense she was losing him.

She didn’t dare call him for fear of having him found out. Of course, he hadn’t told her that he didn’t want to be discovered, but everything else had led her to assume it was what he wanted. Why all the secrecy? If he had come only to see her, and had made sure of no one knowing of his presence, and had conducted their little get-together in the most secluded part of the ballroom, then that was the only reason.

She knew he knew that she was following him, though. Every now and then she’d catch a fleeting glimpse of him looking back at her from over his shoulder, the wolf’s eyes leering at her. She didn’t even know where he was headed; she didn’t dare take a second to look around to ascertain where she was in fear of losing sight of him.

They were almost out of the ballroom now. As she pushed her way through the crowd, all she could see was the black of his costume and nothing more as he streaked ahead.

She heard rather than saw the great doors open, and she knew she lost him. He slipped out and the doors shut behind him.

She only had a bit more to go, though. Maybe she could catch him before he left the castle! With desperation, she forced her way through to skid in front of the doors when suddenly, someone caught her around the waist and she found herself swept against that someone's chest.

"What-?" she looked up, a jinx ready on her lips, only to falter and sag in relief.

It was just Harry.

Before he could say anything, she twisted and turned in his hold, looking anxiously towards the doors. He would be gone by now. She cursed to herself and sighed inwardly. This meant she would have to see him during the next Hogsmeade weekend.

"You all right?" Harry asked, bewildered.

"Never better," she replied somewhat absently, reluctantly removing her eyes from the doors.

"Well, that's fantastic, because we should be heading back to the tower soon."

Hermione turned, raising a brow. "We?"

Harry sputtered. "Well I was hoping you'd stay the night at the Gryffindor Tower," he muttered sheepishly. "Ron and I miss you."

Hermione pretended to think it over for a second, before poking him in the shoulder and laughing. "Of course," she agreed. "But it'll have to wait until the ball is completely over. Neville and I do have to take care of a few things, you know."

"That won't take too long, will it?" Harry asked, stifling a yawn as he looked around.

"It shouldn't," Hermione said. It was true. As they spoke, students were leaving the room, shuffling with their tired feet or talking animatedly over who wore what disguise or simply yawning widely.

"As a matter of fact, I think our work is half-done," she said, sweeping her eyes around the room. Neville was already announcing it was time to go, and the room was nearly empty. The band was packing up-they would have to see them out in a minute or two, but it seemed the whole spectacle had wrapped up quite nicely.

She turned to Harry. "Why don't you run ahead to the Gryffindor tower? I'll meet you there in a bit."

"Why don't we just meet up at your dorm?" he suggested a little shyly. "We'd have more privacy there..."

Hermione hesitated.

"Of course," Harry continued, noticing her pause, "we wouldn't be doing anything you're not comfortable with."

“That seems a fine idea,” Hermione conceded, and after she gave him her password, they parted with a quick kiss.

“Rest assured, my lady, that our efforts were not in vain! We have a success on our hands!” called Neville as Hermione approached him.

“Never was I in doubt, kind sir, not even for one moment,” she responded.

There was no one around to listen to their strange banter. Whenever Neville was in a really good or playful mood, he would resort to speaking like this; and so dear was he to Hermione that she couldn’t help but play along.

“Never in doubt!” he cried, waving his wand so that all the garbage was cleaned up off the floor. “How could that be?”

“Well, you see, with minds as great as ours, there should be not a flicker of doubt,” Hermione answered levelly, magicking the décor away.

They worked quickly as they continued their silly speeches, and within a matter of minutes, their work was done.

Gone was the beautiful and opulent opera house, and back in its rightful place was the Great Hall. Hermione hummed with contentment and tucked her wand back into her cloak. Neville stretched, rubbing at his sore shoulders.

“Guess we should call it a night, eh?”

Hermione nodded.

“Unwavering Loyalty,” Hermione mumbled to her door. She stumbled inside and kicked off her shoes as she began to untie her cloak.

She was so tired; she let it fall into a silky puddle on the floor as she moved on and found Harry lying down on the sofa in front of the fire.

“Still awake?” she giggled, and he grunted in response.

“Give me a moment,” she whispered.

She slipped inside her room and slipped out of her dress, sighing as she felt the soft fabric whisper against her skin. She brushed her teeth and washed her face and pulled on the first pair of pajamas she found.

She cracked open her door and found Harry sound asleep, his mouth slightly open. She prodded him awake.

“Whassat?” he slurred, adjusting his glasses.

“You’re welcome to sleep in my room,” she said, biting her lip. “Or you can sleep on the sofa if you like.”

He sat up slowly, looking her in the eye. “Are you sure about this?”

She nodded, and then turned around and walked into her room.

She climbed up into her bed and lay down on her side, watching as he, clad in his own pajamas, crawled up beside her.

He settled himself behind her and wrapped his arms around her, burying his head into her hair. Hermione was acutely aware of how close her bum was to his crotch, how the warmth of his body bled into hers, how wonderfully tight his arms were around her. She closed her eyes and smiled when she felt him press soft, feather-light kisses onto her neck.

"I love you," he murmured into her skin.

She stared at the wall on the opposite side of the room.

"I-I love you too," she whispered.

He didn't hear her. He had fallen asleep.

He brushed raindrops off his coat as he entered the Manor quickly, heading towards his study. Blaise was already there, sipping brandy as he played a game of chess against himself.

The fire was blazing away and he stood in front of it, warming his cold body. He shrugged off his coat and tore off the mask and gloves.

Already, he was changing.

He was stretching upwards, his skin growing paler and his features finer and handsomer. His eyes, once a light hazel, were drained of color till they resembled an icy, churning ocean. His hair was a pale blond, reaching a little past his ears, and there was a slight wave to it. His lips regained their fullness, his chin was pointed once more, and his nose was long and fine.

He took in a deep breath when it was over; using the Polyjuice Potion was not pleasant.

Blaise had been watching with mild interest, but now that his friend's true form was revealed, he pushed the chess set away and finished his drink.

"How'd it go?"

Draco turned; the grin on his face was absolutely feral.

"She bought it."

They awoke when the sun's rays shone through her window and the freshness of the new day filled the air around them.

She blinked and stretched, arching her back so that her bum pushed backward, unaware of the sleeping male behind her.

And squealed when she felt his arms tighten around her, drawing her back into his hardening body.

"Morning," he groaned, kissing her shoulder.

"M-Morning," she gasped, her heart still racing.

“Shall we head down to breakfast?” he asked, tracing patterns on her skin with his thumb.

“Yes.”

Neither of them moved, however. They were perfectly content to stay where they were and bask in the sunlight.

“So who was that mysterious wolf-man of yours yesterday?” he asked, lips brushing against her skin.

Hermione closed her eyes. “A fifth-year Hufflepuff,” she lied. “Though he’s rather keen on not having his identity revealed, so there’s no use trying to get me to tell.”

“Bollocks,” Harry chortled as he slid off the bed, stretching.

She gave an inaudible sigh of relief and then sprang off the bed, preparing her mind for the day. It was Saturday, and though she had a small pile of homework to finish, she was set on taking the day off to think about things.

Harry was already in the common room, his hand on the doorknob. Quickly, Hermione looked around, and her eyes landed on Neville’s door. Was he inside? She didn’t know when he had come back from the ball, or if he’d met up with Luna somewhere else. The thought made her giggle.

“You can’t leave looking like that!” she gasped, gesturing at Harry, who looked down at his t-shirt and pajama bottoms.

Before he could grimace, she had waved her wand and muttered a simple incantation that had transformed his nightwear into regular clothes that were suited for the weekend.

“Thanks,” he grinned and crossed the room to give her a peck on the lips. “See you at breakfast?”

Hermione nodded, smiling. Once he’d left, she ran to shower. It had been an interesting week, to be sure, she surmised as she pulled off her clothing. She knew she wouldn’t be able to concentrate on her homework with the mystery of Cormac and what he had to tell her prodding at her mind, so she resolved to do nothing today. She deserved a break, did she not? After all, she’d practically worked herself to the bone along with Neville, preparing for the ball.

As she showered, she let the hot water run over her skin and closed her eyes, letting the exhaustion seep out of her. The wonderful hot steam swirled around her as she grabbed her bottle of shampoo, squirting some into her palm. She lathered it into her hair and massaged the substance into her scalp, relishing the floral scent.

Once she was out of the shower and wrapped in her fluffy purple towel, she padded back into her room and to her dresser, but nearly yelped in surprise when she saw her reflection. Picking up a wet strand of her hair, she laughed to herself. She’d forgotten she’d charmed her hair into a different color. With a flick of her wand, the problem was resolved and she set about to get ready.

Perhaps coming out here wasn't the best idea, Hermione thought to herself as she stood at the entrance of the school's courtyard.

It was a lovely place to come and relax, of course, with its arched stone wall surrounding the perimeter of the area and an assortment of (dying) plants arranged so as to give the spot a cheery look. A medium-sized fountain sat in the center, where one could sit on the bank and chat with friends. There were stone benches scattered about to maximize comfort and no matter where you sat, you would have a clear view of the Quidditch Pitch.

But there was no one out here.

Perhaps it was the cold. Though she was swathed in her warmest jumper and her second-favorite pink scarf (she had lost her blue scarf sometime last year), she shivered with the cold anyway as she walked further into the recesses of the courtyard.

As soon as she had procured a seat, she lifted her legs up and sat Indian style, bringing her bag into her lap. Wrapping her arms around it, she lifted her knees slightly and placed her chin on the top of her bag.

She needed to think.

Should I go see Cormac? She thought.

If I go see him, I'll find out what exactly has happened to him since he left, and how Malfoy's been involved. Maybe what he can tell me can help us track him down, so he can be sent to Azkaban, where he belongs.

But how will I hide this from Harry and Ron? They'll want to know who I'm seeing. And what if Cormac is lying? He probably doesn't even have anything to tell me. He said he wanted to see me again. Maybe all this is a ruse.

She sighed as the questions ran through her head, making it impossible to focus.

Well, you do have a couple of days, a thoughtful voice in her mind suggested. *You have a while to make a decision...*

Fine, then, she resolved. *I'll think it over.*

That being decided, she pulled a heavy, worn book out of her bag and settled it on her lap, caressing the weathered pages softly. The title, *Hogwarts, a History*, stared back up at her, and she smiled at it, recalling the day she had gone to Diagon Alley to buy it.

She had been only eleven then, brimming to the top with happiness and wonder as she discovered the new world she was meant to be part of. The moment she had pulled down that book (with effort, for it was heavy and she was small and not very strong,), she had known that she would love the book. And she was right, of course. Whenever she was troubled or needed peace, this was the book she came to. This was how she coped. Harry and Ron had teased her mercilessly over the years, about how she preferred books to actually company, but she didn't mind, for it was true. Books were always there to listen, with their solemn pages, and they never judged you. Seven years she had had this book, and though it was fraying and worn and the binding was tearing, she would never buy a new one. Some things were just too valuable to replace.

9. Dead

“We know he’s got Horcruxes,” Ron said as he paced around the Common Room, “but how many are there? And what exactly are they?” He dragged a hand over his face.

It was Saturday again, and the Golden Trio had assembled for a private meeting in the Head Common Room. Neville was out at the Greenhouse, so they had no need to worry about being overheard. The trip to Hogsmeade was in a few hours, which was what they were all waiting for, but for now, they had important matters to discuss.

“Dumbledore said he would have at least seven Horcruxes,” Harry said, looking away when he felt the pang in his chest at his mention of his fallen mentor’s name. “And we don’t know what all of them are; from the memories we looked at, we found they’re objects of great importance or value to him. One was obviously the diary, which we don’t have to worry about, since I destroyed it before I even knew what a Horcrux is. The ring Dumbledore wore was also one; he managed to destroy it, though it ruined his hand. The Slytherin locket his mum had was another, and I’m willing to bet all my money on the cup of Hufflepuff, seeing as Riddle stole it after he had killed the woman who owned it.”

Hermione and Ron exchanged grim glances.

“Where are we going to find all of these?” Hermione asked carefully. “They can’t all be in the same place, can they?”

Harry shook his head. “Too risky. He’s hidden them in different places. Luckily, the diary was practically thrown at us, and Dumbledore found the ring and the locket. Even though it was a fake, it gave us clues as to where it might be now, so that’s better than nothing. We’ll have to look for them.”

“Well *that* sounds easy,” Ron said sarcastically. “They could be anywhere, mate! We might as well go and ask him where they are.”

“Not quite,” Harry said thoughtfully, repressing a smile. “Dumbledore said each item was hidden somewhere that probably meant a lot to him, or held some kind of significance. The locket was found in some horrid cave he used to go to when he lived in the orphanage. The ring he took from his last relatives. No doubt there’s one hidden here in Hogwarts, seeing how much this place meant to him. And Malfoy Senior had the diary before he passed it on to Ginny. Malfoy’s one of his best and most trusted Death Eaters, isn’t he? So if he had it in his care, he might have another, unless Riddle’s trusted one of the Horcruxes to Bellatrix.”

“And where’s the safest place to keep something?” Hermione asked slyly.

Ron turned away from the window, grinning at them, though his face had gone white.

“Gringotts.”

It was time for the excursion down to Hogsmeade, so they, excited with their brilliant discovery and plans to go in search of the forbidden items, went down to the villa together.

"Fancy going into the Three Broomstick's first?" Ron asked. "I'm starved."

Hermione looked at him with wide eyes. "We just ate!"

"I'm a growing man," Ron said, laughing. "I need nourishment!"

They cheerfully walked into the establishment, and quickly found a booth at the far corner, where there were fewer people. Ron hurried off to place their orders. The general loudness of the place and cozy fires made for a welcoming environment, and Harry and Hermione settled comfortably together on one side.

"So when do we leave?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Spring. During the Easter hols."

Hermione's eyes widened again, and her face drained of color.

"But our NEWTS exams!"

Harry tried not to laugh as he looked at her dismayed face. He cleared his throat and placed his hand atop hers, which lay on the table.

She looked down and cleared her throat.

"Obviously taking Voldemort down is a priority," she said. "I'm sorry. I just-it hurts a bit to think about the possibility of us leaving school and never being able to finish."

Harry nodded. It was a thought he'd mulled over for a while, now.

"I know it's tough to think about," he said softly. "I don't like the thought of it, either. There's so many ways this can go wrong. But I have to."

He looked down at the coaster he held between his hands.

"And if you don't want to go, don't. I'd never force you to come with me if that's not what you want."

Hermione put her hand on his arm.

"I'm going," she said firmly. "For better or for worse, I'll be there."

Harry leaned into her, cupping her cheek, and kissed her softly.

"Who knows," Hermione said when they pulled apart, "maybe McGonagall will let us complete our education once everything's over."

But all that depended on the outcome of the approaching war.

Before Harry could reply, Ron arrived with their drinks and his order.

"Here you are," he chimed happily, setting their Butterbeers down on the table with muted *clinks* and set his own plate in front of him as he sat down.

They walked out of the Three Broomsticks some time later, trying to decide where they should go next.

“Go to Zonko’s,” Hermione said lightly. “I think I’ll look about and try to do some Christmas shopping, so I might be a while.”

“Sure you don’t want us to go with you?” Ron asked, already heading off towards the joke shop. Harry wasn’t far behind him, but he was looking at Hermione seriously.

“Positive.” She smiled to reassure them. “If I’m not back in an hour and a half, you can find me by the Shrieking Shack.”

“Why there in particular?” Harry asked.

“They’ve got some benches by there I can sit on, and I’ve got a book I’ve been meaning to finish.” The lie had come out of nowhere but was just what she needed. The boys nodded disinterestedly.

“Alright then,” Harry said and squeezed her hand before he went after Ron.

Hermione waited until they were gone to head off to the Shrieking Shack, peering cautiously about her all the meanwhile to make sure no one noticed her. The crowds thinned out as she continued down the path that eventually ended once she had reached Hogsmeade’s end. She was familiar enough with the Shack to know what direction to go-it wasn’t far off. She could see the cruelly angled branches of the Whomping Willow above the regular treeline.

She didn’t know why she was doing this, to be honest.

She had decided she wouldn’t come. It was too risky. She didn’t even know if Cormac was being honest. He could be up to no good, really.

But if Malfoy was involved, she had to know. Any information Cormac might have on him could help her-she might pass on the information to the Order, and it could lead to his capture.

Don’t get your hopes up, she warned herself.

She had been too afraid to take action before. She had learned her lesson, and would not let it happen again.

She stepped off the end of the path and entered the forest.

Her walk wasn’t long-but the minutes seemed to crawl slowly here and the sun overhead was starting its descent. She would have to hurry, as all the students would be expected back at the castle before long. There was a sudden chill in the air here. She shuddered, wrapped her robe more tightly around herself, and wondered why she had chosen to do this alone. For all her talk about taking action, she had gone about it wrong and was starting to regret it now.

The Shrieking Shack was in her view suddenly. She stopped abruptly, having made up her mind to go back to Harry and Ron and tell them the truth, and to ask them to accompany her.

“I thought you wouldn’t come.”

She let out a startled yelp and jumped at the sound of the voice that came from behind her. She placed her hand on her heart, feeling her racing pulse as she gulped in air, whirling

around to find Cormac there, dressed in dark robes with his hood drawn.

“Could you not do that?” she hissed, glaring at him.

“Nice to see you too, Granger,” he chuckled.

“Can’t say I return the sentiment,” she said peevishly. “I’m still wondering why I came at all.”

He ignored her comment, surveyed their surroundings.

“You know why you’re here,” he said boldly, giving her an even stare. “For some reason, Malfoy’s linked me into whatever’s going on between you, and I’m trying to figure out why, and you want to hear what happened. Does that sound right?”

She hesitated and then nodded.

“What say you we take a walk?” he offered. “We’re likely to be overheard here.”

“By who?” Hermione protested. “There’s no one around.”

“Says the girl who went to a lonely pub to organize an illegal group, thinking they wouldn’t be overheard,” he taunted, grinning. “One never knows who or what might be lurking around.”

“I’ve walked far enough,” she said. “I’m not leaving this area.”

He glanced behind her, frowning. Hermione heard a twig snap in the distance and whirled around, but found nothing.

“Then at least let’s talk inside the Shack,” Cormac said, still frowning in the direction the sound had come in. “Funny as it may sound, we’ll be safer there.”

Hermione looked around the area again, unsure.

“Fine,” she conceded.

Cormac had already set off on the path, walking towards the Shrieking Shack.

The area was eerily quiet-but it had always been this way. In every instance she had visited the Shrieking Shack, she didn’t recall ever having heard birds in the area. She followed Cormac to the Shack, discretely withdrawing her wand from its pocket to reassure herself. A cold rain began to fall, scattering tiny dark spots all over her coat and soaking into her hair. She began to walk faster and quickly reached him at the shabby little house, his palm lying flat on the wall.

“There’s no way to get in, you know,” she said haughtily, crossing her arms.

At least, none that you know.

And just as she finished her sentence, he pressed a loose-looking brick further in, and a door appeared to its right.

Cormac turned to her, grinning again.

“You were saying?”

Hermione looked in amazement at the door. How long had that been there? Even Harry hadn't known about this, or else they'd never have bothered to take the entrance under the Whomping Willow.

More importantly how did *Cormac*, of all people, know about this?

"After you," he motioned for her to step inside. The door opened and a staircase was revealed, leading to an upper level.

"I think I'll ignore the decorum just this once. *You* go first," she said, eyeing him suspiciously as a fat raindrop splashed onto her nose.

He bowed. "Anything to please the lady." With a wink, he began to climb the stairs and Hermione followed, but not before making sure the door was ajar; just enough so anyone passing by would notice it, or if she had need of a speedy exit.

She stepped up onto the upper level and found herself in the same exact room she, Harry, and Ron had been in when they had had their confrontation with Professor Lupin, Professor Snape, and Peter Pettigrew. That felt like so long ago, now. The room was saturated with the memory, with the horror of what had happened there. She looked down at the floor and found she was standing on a particularly nasty set of claw marks. She edged away.

Cormac stood leaning against the wall, staring at her.

"Well?" she asked, pressing her palms against her thighs, trying to sound more confident than she felt. "Tell me what happened. I can't stay long."

The corner of his lips lifted in a lazy smile.

"How've you been?" he asked suddenly, his face stony.

Taken aback, Hermione bit her lip. "Um. Fine. What does it matter?"

"It matters plenty to me," he said, shrugging a shoulder. "I've been wondering. How's your relationship with Potter?" he asked.

His questions came out as demands. Was she imagining the slight smile on his face morphing into a sneer?

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "I don't think that's any of your business."

"You're not afraid Malfoy will get at him, too?" Cormac asked. He began to walk towards her, and uneasy, she began to move unconsciously away from the exit to keep distance between them.

"Why would Malfoy go after Harry?" she asked impatiently. "Voldemort wants him, not Malfoy."

"Well he got to me after he found out what I did," Cormac said. "He seems to think of himself as your bodyguard."

"He's not," she said hotly. "All I ever wanted from him was to leave me alone."

"Mind telling him that, then?" Cormac asked. "He gave me a good scare and warned me to stay away from you or else."

"Then why bother going back to Hogwarts just to see me and then coming to this length just to talk?" Hermione asked, frowning. "It doesn't make sense. If he's watching you, he'll know. You might have just sent me a letter and saved the both of us all this trouble instead of putting us both at risk by making me come here."

"I wanted to see you again," he said simply. "And I didn't force you to come. *You* decided to come on your own. I reckon you'd have had a harder time believing me if this was all done on paper, besides."

She didn't appear convinced.

"I don't know how," he began, "but Malfoy knew what I'd done to you at the ball. I'd already been sent home, but over the Christmas holiday he found me, and he made me pay."

Hermione's hands began to shake at the memory of the assault inside her mind as Malfoy had forced his way into her mind and memory. Her insides had turned to ice.

"He used Legimency on me," she croaked. "He cornered me that night and saw what happened. It wasn't his business, I didn't tell him willingly."

"He made it his business," Cormac replied woodenly. "He doesn't like having his things tampered with so he punished me."

"I'm *not* his," she said angrily. "I may not be very fond of you, but I'd never have sent him after you, Cormac, believe me. That's all his own doing."

Cormac's face was eerily vacant except for his stare which was bright and dark as he looked at her. The hairs on her arms stood on end and she edged back. Something wasn't right.

"Cormac is dead, Hermione."

His voice was devoid of emotion.

Hermione froze. Her heart stuttered.

"What?"

Cormac smiled. "Malfoy tracked me down over the Christmas holiday when I was with my parents. He killed all three of us although my parents were innocent and grabbed a few of my hairs in case they would come in handy." He laughed. "I guess they did."

"What are you saying?" she asked, stumbling over her own words in a haze of confusion. She raised her wand at him, nearly dropping it in fright. He took another step and she took one step backward, staggering under her mounting terror.

"What I'm saying is that I'm not Cormac, sweetheart," he said, his grin growing wider, more predatory. "And that you really should have known better than to come here alone."

This is a nightmare, she was telling herself, knowing all the while the truth was the exact opposite. *Just another one. Wake up. **Wake up.***

And Hermione stood, paralyzed with fear as 'Cormac' began to transform before her. She knew who it was behind the disguise, but the knowledge did not stop the sudden horrible shock that ran through her when Malfoy was finally revealed before her, his eyes as cold and

wanting and vivid as they had been in her dreams since the last time she had seen him in person.

How stupid she had been.

How very, extremely stupid.

She never should have come here.

"I told you that you were too naive, Princess," he said gloatingly, taking another step forward. She raised her wand higher and he paused. "You were so eager to believe in McLaggen. What did you think would happen? Did you think *he* could actually help you? He could hardly even help himself when I got hold of him."

"N-No..." she croaked, eyes widening with horror. Her knees threatened to give out. Her mouth was suddenly so dry. "Petrificus totalis!"

He diverted her spell with a wave of his hand-she frowned, disbelieving. Since when had he become proficient at wandless magic?

"Oh yes," he said, his grey eyes practically sparkling with victory. "I told you I'd come back for you. You can't run from me, little bird."

A burst of adrenaline rushed through her. Before her fear could paralyze her again, Hermione sprang into motion, shouting 'Stupefy!' 'Locomotor motis!' and 'Impedimenta!' all in one breath with increasing desperation. Again she watched in horror as he blocked each spell, advancing towards her as easily as though he were walking down an abandoned hall at Hogwarts, even though she kept firing a barrage of jinxes and curses at him to prevent him from doing so.

Pausing to catch her breath, she cast a Protego just in time to deflect his Imperius, edging away from him as he circled her slowly. His eyes were all over her and she shivered. Her stomach churned. she eyed the exit, wondering if she could distract him and run to it quickly enough.

He'd tracked her eyeline and with two steps, blocked the exit. She shook her head.

"I told you I'd be back for you," he said, staring hard into her horrified face.

"*For God's sake*," she said through grit teeth, flicking her shield to the side to deflect another Imperius. "Leave me alone!"

She brought down her shield to attempt to Stun him again-he redirected the spell to streak to the other side of the room and miss him entirely, sending another Imperius at her that she blocked again.

They faced each other, wands ready and waiting. She was breathing hard, both from panic and from her exertion. He was intent, implacable, looking as normal as if they were schoolmates who'd just run into each other off campus. But his eyes were malice, and there was an edge to him that screamed danger, more so than ever before. Whatever had happened in the months since their last physical interaction, it had turned him for the worse. He appeared stronger, too.

Like he's been training for this.

The thought made her legs turn to water.

"Why can't you just accept I don't want you?" she asked, trying to keep her voice even. "Why are you like this?"

There was almost pity in his gaze as he looked at her. He stepped closer, reached out as if wanting to brush his hand against her cheek-she flinched violently and moved away. He didn't follow.

"I told you before that I understand your feelings," he replied. "But I don't need to take them into account to get what I want."

"You're a monster," she said, shaking.

"Come with me willingly and I won't hurt you," he said, extending his hand toward her. "It will be easier for you, Granger."

"Never."

He smiled. "It was worth a try. Imperio!"

She ducked away from the jet of white light, raising her shield again, but it was too late-he had sent a tripping jinx at her in the same breath as she had dodged, and it snaked around her ankles and pulled tight, knocking her to the ground.

She hit the floor hard, landing on her side, her breath flying from her lungs in a dismayed gasp.

There was another jet of light, and suddenly a stinging sensation hit her hand, shocking her into releasing her wand, which flew off to her right. She grasped for it blindly on the floor, her hands scrabbling against the wood, not wanting to take her eyes off Malfoy.

"No—"

There was blood in her vision when she opened her eyes-there was a sharp pain along her hairline. She winced and tried to roll away and into a sitting position as she felt him approach and then kneel. Bile rose in her throat as he straddled her. She sat up with a burst of energy and tried to push him over.

His hands met her chest and shoved her to the floor roughly. Her head hit the floor and she cried out, stars exploding across her range of vision. She had bitten her tongue in the collision and tasted blood.

"Let me GO!"

She tried to punch him-he caught her wrist and then took the other when it tried to complete what the other had attempted. He pinned her arms to the floor above her head with magic easily.

"I won't," he said. "You're coming with me whether you want to or not. You're *mine*, Granger."

She breathed quickly, on the verge of hyperventilating, her eyes wide and fearful. He reached out and took her chin in his hand. She struggled to tear herself out of his grip.

"I am *not* yours," she ground out and yelped when he slapped her quickly afterward. White exploded across her vision and faded away slowly.

Reaching out, he grabbed a fistful of her curls and angled her face so her neck was fully exposed.

"Yes, you are," he said, reaching up with his free hand to hold her elbow where he had carved his initial into her flesh. He squeezed it painfully. "I claimed you. You seem to have forgotten-I saw how you danced with Longbottom and Potter while *my* mark is on you. So quick to make yourself the school whore, aren't you? As if that could make you forget what I did to you?"

"Harry is my *boyfriend*," she said angrily. "And I'll dance with my friends how I want."

He squeezed her throat in warning.

"You are *mine*, Granger," he hissed, burying his face into her soft skin. "*Mine*, and no one else's. You have no right to share yourself with anyone that isn't me."

Her face twisted in outrage.

"Go to hell," she writhed underneath him, angling to give him a kick in the crotch.

"I definitely am, but so are you," he said before crushing his lips to hers.

"G-get o-umph!" she tried yelling as his lips covered hers feverishly. He nipped at her lips, running his tongue over her bottom lip before delving inside her mouth as she sputtered and tried turning away, but his hands held her head so that she couldn't, and for several moments he held her hostage there, greedily plundering her mouth. She had frozen, her eyes open and staring at the ceiling, not acknowledging his attentions.

He finally broke away for air, leaving her panting and terrified underneath him, watching him warily. His hands ran down her figure, greedily taking in what he had dearly missed.

"Malfoy, *please*," she said, her voice shaking. "Let me go. They'll be looking for me—"

He covered her mouth.

"I've missed you," he muttered softly, trailing his lips down her neck, sucking and biting hard on her skin as she shook her head to try and rid herself of his smothering hand.

He tore open her robe with the aid of magic.

"Please!" Hermione cried, her words muffled, fighting tears back. "Stop!" When he didn't move, she calmed her mind as best as she could and focused on attempting wandless magic, knowing it was a faint hope, but all she had.

Expelliarmus! she thought frantically as he began kissing her neck once more.

With a startled cry, Malfoy flew off of her and landed on his back some feet away. Not caring if he had hit his head or not, Hermione attempted to jump up before she was yanked back by her arms, which were still bound to the floor.

Relashio! she thought with all her might, but nothing happened. She heard Malfoy swear and get up and she trembled with fear, screwing her eyes shut and focusing as best as she

could on freeing herself.

He was back on her before she could, livid, wrapping his hands around her throat, murder in his eyes.

"Stop fighting me," he growled at her, straddling her again as she fought to buck him off. "This is going to happen. Accept it."

She shook her head weakly.

The darkness was coming again, spotting her vision as her body weakened from lack of oxygen.

Her lungs screamed for air. Her open mouth tried to suck it in, but achieved nothing. A strange clicking sound emitted from her throat. She feebly shook her head again, her eyes closing without her wanting them to. Her legs jerked briefly in a last attempt to save herself, to plea for air.

How could I have been so stupid? She asked herself, surprised to find how her own voice inside her head was growing fainter and fainter. *At least I'm dying. I'd rather die than let him take me.*

Swearing, Draco loosened his hold and cradled her head, watching as it turned limply to the side, her eyes shut. For a precious second he was horrified, thinking he had killed her, and panicked, he checked her pulse.

She wasn't dead. Draco sighed shakily, and silently berated himself for having lost control. He could still feel the faintest pulsing underneath his hands. As he watched, she began to breathe again, drawing in hoarse, whistling breaths that began to restore the color in her cheeks.

"Ron?"

Ron looked up from his stance at the cashier, where he was paying for his purchases.

"Yeah, mate?"

"It's been longer than an hour and a half. We need to go get Hermione."

"She's fine, mate," Ron chuckled as he grabbed his bag of sweets and stowed it inside his pocket.

"Probably, but it's getting dark out, and it's almost time to go back to the castle," Harry said, fighting the urge to run outside the shop and look for his girlfriend.

Something didn't feel right.

They made their way as quickly as they could to the area by the Shrieking Shack but didn't find Hermione.

“She mentioned benches. There’s never been benches in this area.” Why hadn’t they caught on to that earlier?...and why had she lied?

“Reckon she went off somewhere?” Ron asked, looking around.

The sense of dread was growing stronger. Harry quelled the panic rising up his throat and looked around fervently before something caught his eye.

Footsteps.

He nudged Ron, and the two took a closer look. The path leading to the shack was made of light dirt, and the rain from before had formed puddles in the form of feet that led up to the ugly building.

He easily recognized Hermione’s footprints, but the larger ones baffled him. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

Without a word, he and Ron sprinted up the path.

Breathe. Breathe. *Breathe.*

She breathed, breathed, breathed again, more deeply each time as she filled her system with the much-needed oxygen. Some of it caught in her throat and she coughed, her thin body shook weakly.

Lips covered her own and tears spilled from her eyes once she opened them.

She was not dead.

He was still here.

“I’m sorry, sweetling,” he murmured into her lips, “but you need to accept that you’re mine. The sooner that happens the easier this will go.”

She couldn’t speak yet so she shook her head, frowning deeply at him.

“Still so damn stubborn,” he said angrily, and she flinched, involuntarily bucking her hips as she tried to scuttle backward.

Her body accidentally came into contact with his and he groaned, rolling his hips into her crotch as he sucked on her neck again.

She let out a hoarse cry of alarm when he began to unbutton her jeans, biting and licking her collarbone, sucking on the swell of her breast. Her top was dealt with just as quickly—he grabbed hold of her jumper and yanked it open so that the buttons holding it closed popped off and skittered across the floor.

“Don’t!”

“I just want a taste before I take you home,” he said, as if that was meant to reassure her.

“Please,” she rasped as he lowered her bra cup and began to suck on her nipple, all while still rocking his hips sensuously into hers, and his other hand attacked her other breast.

“Keep begging,” he said. “What do you want? Shall I claim you once and for all right here and now? Is that why you’re begging?” he pulled on her nipple with his teeth, earning a sharp cry from her. She could feel his arousal growing against her thigh, and she clamped her lips shut to hold back the vomit that was crawling up her throat.

“No!” she said, squirming to avoid his touch. “Don’t touch me!”

“Let me have my fill,” he ordered, his breath hot against her breast. “I’ve gone for months thinking about you. Dreaming of you. Waiting for the day I’d have you at last.”

His other hand crawled down her abdomen.

“I don’t care how long you’ve suffered,” she snapped, but sucked in a shocked breath when his fingers brushed against her core, covered by her underwear.

“Shut up, Granger,” he murmured, licking at her jaw.

She drew in a deep breath and screamed for all she was worth when he began to prod his finger inside of her. Malfoy actually winced and it goaded her on, to bellow as best as her body would allow, to bypass the pain and the fear and alert anyone nearby. She fancied she could feel her ribs rattling inside her with the force of her screaming but she didn’t care if it would leave her hoarse for a week if it worked, and she knew chances were slim. Already her throat was burning and felt so raw that it hurt to whisper let alone scream, but she had to take advantage of the fact that Malfoy had not silenced her yet, and that the exit door was still open a crack. She screamed so loudly, she didn’t hear the commotion exploding around her.

The floor vibrated underneath her, and Malfoy swore as footsteps were heard coming up the stairs in a terrible racket.

Suddenly her arms were free, and she stopped screaming to pull in more air as she scrambled to escape the dark wizard.

He wasn’t having that, however. He hauled her up, wrapped one arm around her neck and dragged her to the back of the room just as Harry and Ron burst into the room, wands raised and bloodlust on their faces.

“Hermione!” Harry cried at the same time as Ron let out a cry of outrage upon seeing the half-conscious witch struggling to breathe as her attacker tightened his hold on her. Harry’s face reddened with anger as he took in the state she was in; her torn blouse, revealing more skin than he would have liked to see. Her jeans were unbuttoned and pulled down a bit, revealing a sliver of skin and her panties. His eyes trailed up and he saw all the marks and blood on her skin and he began to shake with rage. She was so pale she looked like a ghost—her eyes were haunted and full of fear.

“Hello, Potter,” Malfoy said, sneering, and Harry almost did a double-take, having focused immediately on Hermione’s state and barely on the wizard who held her upright.

The last time Harry had seen him, he had been triumphant, a self-satisfied smirk on his face as he’d watched Dumbledore’s corpse fall from the Astronomy Tower, his form illuminated by the quickly fading green light from the killing curse he had cast. There was an eerie quality to his eyes that Harry hadn’t remembered from before—had that always been

there? He looked the same and yet so different, it was hard to place. And frightening, though he would never admit it.

No wonder Hermione looked so shell-shocked.

Her nightmares. They had come true. And again, he hadn't been able to help her until it was too late.

That bloody bastard.

"Let her go, Malfoy, or I swear I'll kill you," Harry said, his arm shaking as he leveled it at Malfoy.

"You wouldn't dare make a move as long as I've got this pretty little bird in my grasp," Malfoy taunted, pressing Hermione closer to himself. "You wouldn't want to hurt her, now would you?"

"Harry!" Hermione pleaded, trying to pry Malfoy's constricting arm from around her throat. "Just do it!"

"Shh!" Malfoy hissed, and with a jab of his wand, she was mute, sobbing as he gripped her jaw forcefully.

"Put your wands down," he barked at the two Gryffindors. "Do it or I apparate now and take her with me!"

Without hesitation, Harry and Ron dropped their wands on the floor and kicked them to the farthest corner of the room, glaring mutinously at Malfoy as they did so.

"That's better."

Hermione dug her fingers into his arm, not caring in the least that her nails were tearing through his skin, leaving bloody marks.

"Don't fight me, Granger," he warned, never taking his eyes off Harry and Ron.

She only scratched harder, wrestling against his hold.

"Keep that up, love, and I'll summon the Dark Lord," he threatened. "You want it to end it all like that? I'll oblige you. You're ending up with me either way."

Hermione's eyes widened and she ceased her attack at once. Harry and Ron made as if to move forward, but Malfoy turned to them quickly, brandishing his wand.

"Do not move," he growled.

"Malfoy, just let her go," Harry said. "She hasn't done anything to you. Take me instead."

"You've no right to make a bargain, Potter," Malfoy spat. "I'm in control here."

He fisted Hermione's curls and drew her head back again, exposing her throat and all the marks he had left on her skin.

"You two are going to stand there and do nothing and let me take my prize, and then you get to go on your merry way with your sorry lives intact. How does that sound?"

Harry clenched his fists.

Malfoy smiled.

"I see you understand your predicament. Smart of you."

Just to rub it in, Malfoy brought his nose to Hermione's throat and inhaled her scent, brushing his lips over her skin. Hermione shuddered with repulsion and gasped when he suddenly whirled her around to face him, wrapping his arms tightly around her.

"What's wrong, Potter?" Malfoy asked Harry, whose fists were clenched so tightly, his fingernails were digging into his flesh, drawing small beads of blood, and his face was red with rage. But his expression was clear and stony; he knew Malfoy was taunting him, trying to provoke him to fight. If he made one move, Hermione would be in grave danger.

Ron was seething, he was absolutely livid and beyond. But one look from Harry was all it took to keep him still. He'd messed up too many fights by raging in. And this wasn't his battle anyway. But he took one look at Hermione, who was shaking and white as a bone and had blood on her face, and it set him to boiling again.

"You don't look all that angry that I've got your girl," Malfoy remarked, bringing his hands down to Hermione's bum and squeezing it painfully. Hermione tried to turn away but couldn't; he was holding her so tightly that as a result, she was pressed against his body and her arms were trapped at her sides. She could barely move.

She was dimly aware that Malfoy was speaking, most likely he was trying to provoke Harry, but she had to intervene before Harry made a move. Surely Malfoy had not been joking about summoning Voldemort. One wrong move from any of them and it was game over.

She didn't have her wand, she suspected it was lying on the floor somewhere. She wouldn't waste time trying to use wandless magic. Her last attempt at it had been futile and look where she was now. No, this situation called for Muggle tactics.

Malfoy's voice broke into her train of thoughts.

"I guess you won't mind if I have *another* taste right now. A parting gift, so you'll have that memory once we've gone."

She looked up in alarm and he crushed his lips against hers, making a point to show Harry that he was using tongue. He was bending her backward, intensifying the kiss as she tried to get away. She opened her eyes and caught Harry's eye, shaking her head slightly at him as he began to lunge for his wand. She sent him a pleading look with her eyes, wincing as Malfoy bit her lips. Harry and Ron, confused but trusting her, didn't make a move.

As soon as Malfoy began to pull away, grinning viciously, Hermione reared her head back and then snapped it forward to smash her forehead against his. It worked. And it hurt. A lot. She felt dizzy immediately, but with the last of her strength and balance, she raised her knee and jammed it between his thighs for good measure.

He let her go abruptly, howling with pain and rage as she fell backward again and scurried away from him on her elbows and feet, nearly sobbing with hysteria. Harry and Ron rushed to her, wands at the ready as they helped her up gently.

But at feeling their hands on her, she panicked and tripped over her trainers, falling hard onto her bum as she scooted backward, covering herself up with the torn remnants of her jumper. Harry's heart broke at seeing her react in that manner, but at the same time, a roar of hatred sprang up from somewhere inside him, demanding blood.

He and Ron turned just in time to hear the crack of apparition as Malfoy made his getaway.

"NO!" Harry roared, and Ron shot an 'Incarcerous' at the small flash where Malfoy's cloak had just whirled out of sight.

He couldn't believe it. They had let him escape.

"*Fuck!*" Ron hissed, ramming his fist into the wall, which gave way under his brutal knuckles. Plaster rained down onto the floor.

Harry stood there, staring at the spot as hate and guilt raged inside his mind.

In a moment, he came to and rushed to Hermione. Ron was already with her, kneeling beside her as she leaned against the wall. Her face was drained of color, the blood from the cuts on her forehead and lip had dried, and he spotted several bruises in a ring around her neck. She wasn't moving, and her eyes were closed. He dropped to his knees, taking her hands in his. They were warm but stiff.

"She's just fainted," Ron said quietly, and Harry's shoulders sagged with relief.

Without another word, Harry gently picked her up, carrying her bridal style out of the room.

"Thank Merlin we got here just in time. We need to get her to the Hospital Wing *now*." Ron sighed, picking up their wands from the floor. "We would attract way too much attention if we went out like this. The passageway that leads from here back into the school; it hasn't been blocked, has it?"

"Let's find out," Harry said, and they ran in search of the right door.

10. Cracking

She awoke with a start, lurching forwards into a sitting position and jerking away when she felt hands on her arms, trying to keep her still.

“She’s awake!” someone called out.

It took a while for her eyes to refocus, but the light was blinding her and all she could hear was a strange jumble of voices and a clattering of footsteps that seemed to be heading straight towards her.

The hands were still on her, and she stifled a sob as she tried to bat them away.

“Don’t-!”

“Please, Hermione,” someone said, “please calm down. He’s not here. You’re safe.”

Upon hearing this, her hysterics calmed somewhat as her eyes began to focus, and the memories of what had transpired slipped back into the corner of her mind.

She looked around.

White.

Everything was white.

Sunlight glowed in every corner of the room; she felt a beam of it on her skin, how it warmed her and she closed her eyes and took a shaky breath as the hands released her. She felt the soft linen sheets on her skin, and they were white too. She was in the Hospital Wing.

She looked at the hands that were resting on her bed and trailed the arms back to the body, and she discovered Ron to be the owner of those hands. His freckled face was drawn and pale with worry, there were shadows around his eyes, indicating he hadn’t slept for some time.

“What happened?” she asked in a whisper. Her throat didn’t hurt anymore, thank Merlin, but it felt odd and fuzzy. She was thirsty.

As if he had read her mind, Ron grabbed a glass of water that was held out to him by Madame Pomfrey (whom Hermione had not realized was there, and jumped upon finding her at the foot of her cot). He thrust the glass at Hermione, who took it at once and drank deeply, not caring that she was spilling a bit or that she was making rather rude gulping noises.

When she finished, Madame Pomfrey took the glass and set it aside on a night table by Hermione’s cot.

“How are you feeling, Miss Granger?” she asked. It did not pass Hermione how the woman’s usually brusque tone was gone, and at this moment, was soft and soothing as a mothers’.

“Fine,” Hermione whispered. She stretched a little; taking in the soreness of her body.

“Liar,” Ron said, but his tone was not accusatory.

The Healer quickly stepped over, and after a quick examination of Hermione's forehead and pupils, nodded to herself and walked away.

"How long was I out?" Hermione asked Ron.

Ron looked out the window. "A day and a half."

"Surely not?" Hermione asked, shocked and dismayed at having missed a day of class.

"Considering what you went through, Pomfrey was surprised you weren't out longer," he spoke quietly. His eyes went back to her.

"And Harry?" she asked, looking round the infirmary once more. He wasn't anywhere to be seen. A prickle of hurt went through her.

"He's talking to McGonagall."

Hermione nodded absently, twisting her hands in her lap.

"He got away, didn't he?" she whispered.

Ron hesitated, and then nodded.

"And you're both angry with me, aren't you?" she added, looking up into his face. "Don't lie. I know you are."

Ron sighed.

"We're upset. Not angry. The one we're angry at is Malfoy. But we should wait until McGonagall and Harry get here to talk about what happened."

Hermione blinked back the tears in her eyes. "Ok," she whispered. "Ok."

His hand was gripping hers again, and he drew the chair he had been sitting on closer to her.

"Malfoy, h-he didn't hurt you, did he?" he asked, stumbling a bit due to how fast he spoke.

Hermione knew what he meant at once, and looked away.

"He didn't rape me," she said, and he visibly sagged in relief. 'He was about to, when you two came,' she continued, and gave Ron a watery smile. "I can't thank you enough for that."

Ron smiled, but before he could say anything the doors to the infirmary swung open and Professor McGonagall and Harry stepped inside, heading straight for her and Ron. She caught Harry's eye and noticed how the tension in his posture slipped away when he realized that she was awake. It didn't take away the concern from his eyes, however.

Harry stationed himself on her other side and took her hand and squeezed it softly. Not happy with a squeeze of the hand, Hermione grabbed him and wrapped her arms around him so tight he grunted. She buried her head in his shoulder. Harry held her tightly in turn, his fingers digging into her back.

"How are you?" he whispered.

She shook her head.

When they broke apart, Hermione leaned over and hugged Ron, too. The various bruises across her body flared with pain but she ignored them.

She let Ron go and settled back on the cot, wiping at her eyes.

"Hello Professor," she said. Pomfrey must have given her something for her throat-it still hurt to talk, but only slightly. Not as much as before.

"Miss Granger," the Headmistress stood at the foot of her cot and gazed at her star pupil with sad, old eyes. "Are you feeling better?"

Hermione nodded.

"I am sorry that we must conduct this interview right now, I know you are fatigued and need rest, but you have endured a serious attack, and we must know everything that happened. Malfoy may have gotten away but there are ongoing searches and any information you give us may help us."

"I understand, Professor," Hermione said, and sat up against the headboard, wincing. Her head pounded sharply.

"Would you prefer to do this in private?" McGonagall said. The room was already empty but it was Harry and Ron she was looking at.

"I want them to stay," Hermione insisted. "They know what happened."

"Very well... How did all of this begin?" McGonagall asked.

"At the ball," Hermione began. "There was someone disguised as a wolf in attendance. He had sent me a note the night before, asking me to save him a dance. He came up to me before the end of the ball and once we were in private, he revealed himself."

"Who was this person?" McGonagall asked, frowning.

"Cormac McLaggen," Hermione said simply, and the three magic folk around her started in surprise.

They opened their mouths to ask how this was possible when Hermione held up her hand to silence them.

"He told me that he had information on Draco Malfoy, but hinted that he was in danger for having the information and for being at Hogwarts, so he asked me to meet him at the Shrieking Shack on the next Hogsmeade weekend, which was yesterday." She took a breath. The Headmistress nodded for her to continue.

"It was obvious he hadn't wanted anyone to know who he was or why he was there, which was why I didn't tell you," she said to Harry and Ron.

"I met him at the Shrieking Shack, and he suggested we go inside so no one could see or hear us." A tear trickled down her cheek. "I was an idiot for believing him. I should have known better."

The Professor began to speak, but Hermione shook her head, and the elder woman fell silent.

“Once we got inside, he started acting odd; asking personal questions—”

“Questions about what?” Harry cut in.

“About our relationship,” Hermione answered quietly, blushing. ‘I told him it wasn’t any of his business, and he changed his demeanor again, and started acting strangely.’ She wiped at her eyes. “It was Malfoy all along.”

“How?”

“He was under Polyjuice pretending to be Cormac. He... he confessed to killing him. He’s been dead for a long time, I think, and nobody knew. Malfoy even hinted at having done it last year but he was so vague I thought he was lying to scare me.”

McGonagall had a severe look on her face. “Did he say how he killed him? Or *why*?”

Hermione shook her head. “He said he did it to punish him for what he did to me at the Christmas ball last year.”

McGonagall frowned. “How did he come to learn of that? It was kept private at your request.”

“Malfoy used Legimency on me after the ball. He assaulted me after Cormac did, and that was when he found out.” She wiped at her eyes again. “I would have told you about him, too, but I was ashamed. It was easier to deal with Cormac than Malfoy.”

The Headmistress’s expression was one of unguarded worry. Sensing the alarm from her students, she masked it quickly.

“Please continue.”

“After he revealed himself, he attacked me,” Hermione confessed with a shudder, the tears falling more freely. “He kept saying that I belong to him and when I refused, he strangled me.”

Harry’s fists clenched as he watched her begin to crack in front of him. More than anything, he wanted to hold her and kiss her and tell her everything was going to be okay; he wanted to find Malfoy and stick his rotten corpse in Azkaban and then kill him over and over, but he forced himself to stay where he was. He squeezed her hand more tightly.

“He was about to rape me when Harry and Ron came,” she said thickly, her throat clogging up due to her tears. “He threatened to leave and take me with him if they didn’t put their wands down, and when I fought him he threatened to summon Voldemort.”

The Headmistresses’ face was void of colour, she held herself more rigidly than usual as she regarded the Head Girl.

“Then he must be a Death Eater now if he has that power,” McGonagall said.

“I don’t think so,” Hermione said. “I didn’t see the mark on his arm.”

McGonagall frowned. “Are you certain?”

“I think so.”

“What happened next?”

“He was taunting Harry,” Hermione recalled softly, looking out the window. “Using me to try to provoke him to starting a fight. When he was distracted, I knocked my head against his and kicked him between the legs. He let me go, and then I passed out.”

“Hermione panicked when we tried to help her up,” Harry said, pain laced into his voice. “Malfoy disappeared before we could get to him.”

Professor McGonagall reached forward and took Hermione’s free hand.

“The Order has been informed. Apparently our searches for Malfoy have not been thorough enough. He seems to be pushing his luck indeed, murdering one of the greatest wizards of all time and then come waltzing back into my school to make things personal.” She scowled at the wall, and then fixed her eyes back on Hermione, withdrawing her hand.

“There is one thing I don’t understand. Why did he come back and target you specifically? You said he assaulted you last year. Why was I never informed?”

Hermione waited a moment to gather her thoughts before responding.

“He seems to have developed a strange sort of obsession with her, Professor,” Harry said.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier,” Hermione said, her face crumpling. “I wanted to... I-I tried. I thought I could handle it at first, and then he kept me from it, and I was so embarrassed and scared...”

“He *kept* you from it?”

“He had me under an Imperius for several months,” Hermione said. “So that I couldn’t tell anyone. It was partly my fault for not having reported him the moment it started.”

“Do *not* blame yourself,” McGonagall said, a little sharply. “No one ever really knows how much they can withstand. You are not weak for it having happened to you, especially when he was cowardly enough to prevent you from defending yourself.”

Hermione nodded, using the bedsheets to dry her eyes.

“Thank you, Professor.”

“And I had you dance with him,” McGonagall said, her eyes pained. “I’m sorry if I unwittingly added to your torment.”

“He would have found a way to bother me at the dance even if it weren’t for the opening dance rule, Professor.” Now it was Hermione’s turn to offer a bleak smile. “Don’t blame yourself.”

“The three of you were there when he murdered Albus.”

They nodded.

“And afterward? I only know that he used the cabinet in the room of requirement for his plan.”

“He tried to take me with him as he was leaving, but I fought back. Before he left, he promised me he would come back for me.”

McGonagall’s hands were clasped together at her front.

"I was not aware there was so much detail missing from what happened that night."

"I didn't want anyone else to know," Hermione said. "I didn't want to take focus from Dumbledore... I haven't even told my parents."

Harry squeezed her hand.

"Your situation is just as serious, my dear," McGonagall replied quickly. "Particularly because it is ongoing. I understand your reasons for not wanting to inform us, but had we known any of this, we would have taken even more precaution in terms of your safety and wellbeing. This is a second serious charge to add to his warrant. There will be a need to call Aurors for more interviews, a renewed search—" She inhaled sharply. "He *must* be brought to justice."

"I don't want to go over this again," Hermione said. 'Not yet.' Her arms were wrapped around herself. "I don't think I could handle it just now."

McGonagall's expression softened. "But you will consent to do it?"

"I don't know," Hermione said, looking torn. "I can't stand that this has taken so much of my life. I do want him to get caught and thrown in Azkaban, more than anything. I also just want to get past it, and I don't want everyone knowing what happened. I'm sorry if that isn't what you want to hear."

It had been difficult enough being questioned by the Aurors about Dumbledore's murder. They had asked so many questions, and she had pleaded with Harry and Ron to not include any of their memories of what had happened with Malfoy during that interaction save from what he had done with Dumbledore.

"I will respect your wishes," McGonagall said after a moment. "And I will tell nobody else. But if you change your mind, do not hesitate to let me know, and we will begin the procedures at once. I will help you in every way that I can."

Hermione nodded. "Thank you, Professor. I think I will come around to it. I just need time."

McGonagall reached forth and patted her hand gently. "I understand."

"Do you think he'll try again soon?" Ron asked.

"I would not be surprised. He has great *confidence* for someone so young," McGonagall's lips were stiff. "I will see to it that more specific protective enchantments are placed around the school, and I will send word down to Hogsmeade to be on high alert for suspicious characters. No Malfoy will ever enter this school again."

Professor McGonagall 'hmmphed' and nodded before taking one step back.

"What you have gone through is no small matter. Would you like to speak to a therapist?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Very well. I'll let you in peace now," she said. "I am glad you managed to escape, and I'm glad you have told me everything. Although it was not exactly wise of you to trust Malfoy, even if he was in disguise."

Hermione bowed her head in shame.

"All the same," the Headmistress continued. "You fought admirably. Even if you did not have your wand, the fact that you bested a pureblood wizard with Muggle techniques speaks volumes about you." Her lips quirked into a small smile before it faded and she frowned, glowering at the wall again.

"They think they can get away with it a second time and take *my* best student," she muttered. "I think *not*."

And with a curt nod, and another prompt squeeze of Hermione's hand, she stalked out of the room.

"Think she's going a bit soft?" Ron asked once the doors had closed behind her.

Harry snorted.

Hermione allowed herself a small laugh before wincing and touching her hand to her forehead. The cut she had suffered from hitting her head against the floor was gone, but it still was quite tender.

She shivered in disgust as she began lightly touching the marked skin on her neck. She had hoped those marks would be gone by now. The bites and hickeys Malfoy had left were healing, but still dotted all over her skin.

Harry and Ron were watching her carefully.

"Can I leave?" she asked, surprised at how small her voice sounded.

Ron nodded. "Madam Pomfrey was just waiting until you woke up. Your other injuries have been taken care of, but she said you're welcome to stay if you want to."

"I don't," Hermione said. "I just want to go to my own bed."

By that, she meant the one back home, in her parent's little brick house, in her own bedroom. But that house was vacant now, and her parents were not even aware that they had a daughter. Her heart constricted with pain. She bit her lip hard to keep from crying, and focused on getting off the cot.

Harry helped her. She stumbled for a second or two before she regained her footing and was able to slip into the loo to change into a new set of clothing Harry had brought from her room.

It doesn't matter what I wear, anyway, she thought to herself as she pulled her shirt over her head. *I'm taking a dozen showers soon as I get to my dorm.*

They walked silently until they reached the Head Common Room. Hermione hesitated before she climbed inside.

"Does anyone know?" she whispered to her two best friends.

"We told Neville, but everyone else thinks you've been sick with the flu. We made sure no one saw you in the Hospital Wing," Ron said.

She nodded before they climbed inside and sat on the squashy armchairs.

It was still morning, so they didn't have to worry about Neville, since he would be in class.

"I'm really sorry I didn't tell you," Hermione said in a half whisper. "I would be dead by now, or worse, he'd have taken me Merlin knows where if you two hadn't found me."

"We're glad we found you in time, and we're glad you're ok, or still getting to 'ok', Harry said." But you know you could have trusted us."

"I know," she said. "I was a fool. I thought I could do it myself. But I was wrong. I never should have trusted him, and I'm sorry."

"From now on, we communicate," he said. "Ron and I will watch out for you. If anything else suspicious happens, we need to know."

He leaned back heavily in his chair, and looked at her with pleading eyes.

"*I can't lose you. We can't lose you, Hermione.*"

Hermione nodded slowly before standing and kissing each on the forehead.

"You can go back to your classes," she said quietly. "Don't expect to see me at dinner." And she slipped inside her room.

She held herself against the door as she listened to them leave, neither speaking a word. Once she was sure they were gone the tears began to fall, and she let them, for she finally was in the privacy of her own room and there was no one to see her.

So he was back.

Hermione pressed her palms to her mouth to stifle the scream that rushed up her throat. She stood there, shaking violently, still feeling his hands on her.

She could have been raped. She could have been *murdered*, and all by her own fault.

Regardless of McGonagall's kind words, it still stung to think about. If she'd just *told* someone early on, none of this would be happening. Malfoy would be dead, behind bars, or better, getting the Kiss from a Dementor.

His promise from the year before echoed in her mind again and she screwed her eyes shut, unsuccessfully attempting to block out his voice.

Her room was dark and silent save for her troubled breathing.

She felt like a failure, for she had been daft enough to let him sway her into following him. She didn't deserve her rank at the top of the class or her Head Girl badge. How wrong they had all been about her.

A truly smart person would not have met in secret or followed a former attacker. A clever person would have known there was something strange about an expelled student returning to a school where he was not welcome. For Merlin's sake, they had almost been caught because of her! Malfoy had been only one step away from calling Voldemort. What if he had done it? Harry would have been killed, and what about her and Ron? What about everyone else? No, she was a complete *idiot, and idiots don't deserve merit.*

She felt her skin crawl as she sank to the floor, still leaning against the door. She felt dirty. She wanted to burn her skin off where he had touched her. She needed a shower. She needed to feel clean again.

He dove to the floor and rolled to the side, narrowly avoiding the stream of Fiendfyre his aunt was aiming at him.

He hadn't even broken into a sweat yet though he had been in this training session for over an hour. They had thrown hexes and jinxes and two of the Unforgivables back and forth, dancing in a dangerous, bloodthirsty training session. He was wholly focused on the battle, his mind blank save for the calculations and preparations he was making for his next moves.

The older witch was giving everything she had in her attacks, but none of her tactics seemed to be enough to beat her nephew. There was a cold fury in his eyes as he maintained his defense, expertly avoiding or deflecting each curse she sent his way. He was dueling extremely well, and she was filled with pride at seeing how great he had become. But he was growing bored, she could tell because he was getting frustrated, moving lazily as he fought her, yet still kept a wonderfully intimidating demeanor that would have made the Dark Lord proud. With narrowed eyes and a flash of her wasted teeth, she had summoned the dark fire.

Aquamenti and Finite Incantatem were powerless against it. Most spells were, really. The best way to stop the cursed fire was to have the caster end it, and that took a very talented, not to mention strong witch or wizard. But Bellatrix was more than capable. She toyed with the horrible flames like they were her children, using the exact amount of control needed so the raging stream of hostile flames was like a whip in her hand.

Any other day, he would have applauded her and grudgingly complimented her. But damn it all, he was in no mood for playing around. He needed this, needed something to shove his failure from the previous days out of his mind.

So he swiftly turned and launched a freezing charm at his Aunt, who easily blocked it. The Fiendfyre was still roaring through the room, not destroying anything but the temperature of the room, for the room was bare. He should have felt hot, but he didn't feel the heat in the least. He was all iron and ice. Aunt Bella was circling him and he watched her steadily as the flames coiled around her like a burning snake. She moved to strike at the same moment he shot three spells; two at her person in general and one at her feet. Two verbal, one silently.

She blocked the first two with a malevolent grin on her face but had not seen the third land at her feet, and therefore was not aware of the small puddle of acid disintegrating her boots.

With a crazed yell she leapt backwards and the flames vanished as she tugged off her footwear. Her feet were unharmed, but the boots were done for. He expected her to fly off in a rage, for he knew she had been fond of those, but instead, she laughed wickedly and tucked her wand back into her bodice.

"Congratulations, nephew," she said, grinning, but her eyes showed her displeasure at having lost. "You grow stronger each day. You honor your family."

He said nothing, only nodded in acknowledgement before stiffly bowing and walking out of the room.

He exited the Malfoy Manor's fencing room and went straight to the lounge, where he knew his father would be.

The handsome older man was standing at the window, looking out into his fine property, where the proud white peacocks roamed, pecking disinterestedly at the ground.

"Father."

He turned and smiled dimly at his son, who had sat down in his favorite armchair made with black leather.

"Son," he greeted him calmly. "I take the training went well?"

Draco scowled. "I grow bored of it."

Lucius nodded. "Bella has told me of your increased skill. It would seem you haven't anymore need of training."

Draco looked relieved. "Thank you, Father."

"Your mother is gaining health," Lucius continued a little quickly. "It is not much, but she does not sleep as much now, and her fevers have lessened."

"But we still don't know the cause of the illness?" Draco asked.

"She is recuperating, and that is all that counts," the older man said.

"Well," Draco stood up. "At least that's something."

"Are you off so soon?" Lucius asked. "You've told me nothing about what happened when you went to get the girl. Did you take her?"

Draco clenched his jaw. "No. I got carried away and Potter and Weasley came in before I could bring her."

Lucius chuckled, much to Draco's annoyance.

"So much trouble all for one girl," he mused.

Draco scoffed. "She's not just some girl, Father."

His father simply smirked. "Oh?"

"I wouldn't go to these lengths for any ordinary witch, would I?" Draco asked heatedly. "She is anything but. That's why I want her."

Lucius tipped his head and peered at his son carefully.

"If I didn't know any better, my boy, I'd say you were in love with her."

"If I was, it wouldn't be a problem, would it?" Draco's voice was soft and menacing. "The Dark Lord has allowed it. I want her and she will be my wife and bear me as many heirs as I please. If anyone has a problem with that then they will deal with me."

"That's my boy," Lucius grinned and clapped Draco on the shoulder before leaving the room.

Draco grimaced to himself. He hadn't quite meant to say so much. But it didn't matter now.

She had gotten away from him. Again.

He wanted to find her, wherever she was right now, and drag her back to his manor and give her a good punishment before giving her the fucking of her life.

No doubt she was in Potters' arms now, crying her silly little heart out over what he had done to her. He scoffed. Compared to what he was planning for her, that was nothing.

He did have to admit he had gotten too carried away-he should have just stunned her and then taken her away. But his lust had overridden his mind and he couldn't resist taking a sample of what he had been denied for so long. He rubbed his fingers over his lips lightly as he remembered how hers had felt against his, the taste and texture.

He had botched his own plan due to his stupidity (and raging hormones). Now it was time to go back to the drawing board and figure out how he was going to get her. He was growing tired of this game. At least on the day of the ball, when he had been disguised as Cormac, he'd taken the liberty of securing a spy to keep an eye on Granger for him. That was better than nothing.

The sun was setting and the darkness was sweeping in, casting its shadowy arm over the castle.

Two young men stood in a private debate inside an unoccupied dusty Charms classroom.

"It's the only way," he spoke softly as he stared out the window.

"No," said the other, shaking his head. "Absolutely not. *No*. We can't do that to her. Didn't you just say back there that we need to communicate better? And now you're here behind her back saying we're leaving without her?"

"And you'd rather we lead her out into the open? Where danger lies at every corner and he can easily find her? Or anyone else?" Agitated, Harry crossed from one end of the room to the other as Ron watched helplessly.

"We'll be careful. We won't let them find her."

"That's not a risk I'm willing to take. You've seen how all this is affecting her. She's not the same... It's not an option, Ron. She stays here."

Ron's shoulders slumped in defeat and he looked out the window at the darkening sky.

"She'll never forgive us for this."

"I'd rather have her hate us than let her be taken by him," Harry snapped.

"How will we tell her?" Ron asked.

"Leave it to me."

11. Memory

Chapter Eleven: Memory

Harry pinned the flailing girl's arms to her sides, wincing as her screams filled his ears. She twisted and writhed underneath him, desperately trying to rid herself of the demon that plagued her in her dreams.

"No!" she screamed, "Stop, *please!*" Tears rolled down her cheeks as she, in her sleep, clawed at Harry's arms and face frantically, crying out even louder when he did not release her.

"It's okay, it's okay," Harry whispered in her ear, smoothing his hand over her curly head as she cried. "He's not there, it's just a dream..."

Exhausted, Harry glanced at the clock. It was nearly one in the morning and this had been going on for at least an hour. He looked down at Hermione's tear stained face, fighting the anger and guilt that tore at his heart.

It was about a week and a half since the attempted kidnapping. Hermione had been subdued and quiet, rarely speaking to anyone but him or Ron or Neville. The bruises Malfoy had given her had faded with the help of a special salve given to her by Madam Pomfrey, the cuts and scrapes had been healed with magic. All the physical signs of the attempted attack had disappeared, but the mental and emotional effects were still quite obviously there, if not worse than what they had been earlier in the year.

It had only been a few hours ago that he had received her owl in his own dorm, just before he had gone to sleep.

I'm scared.

Those two words were all it took for him to roll out of his bed and pull out the Invisibility Cloak, and practically run to the Head dorms. Luckily, she had not changed her password, and he did not run into Filch or Mrs. Norris along the way.

He had barged into her room, striding over to her bed, which was oddly empty.

"Hermione?" he had asked.

Her relieved sigh behind him made him jump. He turned in time to find that she had hidden herself behind the door, and was lowering her wand, which had been aimed at him.

"You frightened me," she whispered.

"I didn't mean to," Harry said, stepping closer and brushing his hand along her cheek. She leaned into his touch for a moment, closing her eyes when he stepped forward and embraced her, wrapping his arms around her protectively.

The room was dark save for the dying embers of the fire, whose light glowed dimly along the bottom of the room.

"I couldn't sleep," she said softly, her voice slightly muffled by his shoulder. "I keep thinking he's here somewhere, waiting to take me away..." She cut herself off with a snort and rubbed at her eyes with her sleeve.

"Merlin help me," she muttered sarcastically, "I'm being such a bloody coward."

"No, you're not," Harry protested. "You are the strongest, bravest girl I've ever known." He placed a feather light kiss on her forehead.

"I don't feel very brave right now," Hermione admitted with an involuntary sniff.

"Were you hiding behind your door all night?" Harry asked.

"No, of course not," Hermione said. "I was sleeping in front of the fire." Gestured tiredly towards the fireplace, where a rumpled pillow lay forlornly atop her scarlet blanket.

Harry stifled a chuckle before taking her hand in his. "That looks very inviting, but I have a better idea." Silently, he had led her to her bed, and once he had succeeded in getting her to lay down, he had summoned her blanket and pillow, which he tucked under her head (the pillow, not the blanket), he (after taking off his glasses and setting them on her nightstand) himself crawled onto the mattress beside her, but only once he was sure it was okay with her.

"I feel like a child," she had murmured into the darkness. "It's like I'm afraid of the dark all over again, but this is worse. I see things moving out of the corner of my eye and I think it's him. Someone talks to me strangely or gives me a funny look and I can't help but think it's him again. I hate it."

"It's okay to be scared," Harry said. "But you can't let that hinder you, Hermione."

"It's hard," she said quietly. "I'm always frightened, now... I feel like I can't trust anyone, because what if it's him again? What if he's still here?"

Harry found her hand and squeezed it, rubbing the pad of his thumb along her soft skin.

"Ron and I saw him Apparate away, Hermione. There's no way he could have gotten back to the school grounds."

Hermione nodded, though he couldn't see her he felt the motion.

Harry lay still; he could feel his heartbeat pulsing in his ears. The dwindling fire suddenly popped, breaking into the stillness of the room, and they both jumped. Hermione gave a shaky laugh after.

"You'll stay, won't you?"

"Of course I will."

"There's something I need to tell you; I should have told you before..."

"What is it?"

Hermione turned to lay on her side, facing him.

"I had nightmares after what happened last year. Bad ones. I would get them every time I went to sleep. Nothing I did stopped them until earlier this year, before the ball."

"How come none of us noticed while we were at the Burrow?" Harry asked, frowning.

"I put Muffliato and Silencing spells on both myself and my room, so I wouldn't wake Ginny or anyone else. I-I'm sorry for not telling you. I just didn't want you to worry, you already have so much on your plate."

"Hermione, you're my best friend. I love you. I *always* worry about you. Especially now. I wish you'd told me earlier."

"I know, I'm sorry." She grasped his hand. "I'm worried that they'll come back."

"If they do, then I'll be here to help you," Harry said. "And soon as I can, I'm bringing that bastard down."

They lapsed into silence shortly after. The fire had died completely at this point, and he knew Hermione had fallen asleep. Her deep, steady breaths calmed him, but he could not sleep. Too much was on his mind.

Ron trusted him to tell Hermione that they were going to leave her at Hogwarts while they would go to find and destroy the Horcruxes. He knew how reluctant Ron had been to agree to the plan-Hell, he didn't want to leave her there, either! But she would be safer inside the castle than running about the country with them. He had spoken to Professor McGonagall, and had requested that someone be with Hermione at all times, to ensure her safety. Naturally, Neville would be with her most of the time, seeing as they shared almost every class and were both Head Students. Her professors would be advised to keep a close watch on her, as well, just as an extra precaution.

Harry loathed the idea of leaving her. No doubt she would be furious beyond belief and knowing her, he knew she would stop at nothing to follow them. He knew she needed them just as much as he needed her; the thought made his heart ache. She would hate him and be heartbroken that she had been left behind. He wanted to bring her, Godric knew it would be easier that way, if she could come along, if Malfoy had never come into the picture.

But he was her boyfriend; it was his duty to protect her, even if she didn't think she needed it. But he loved her too much to lead her out into the open, where anything could happen. What if they were captured? What if Voldemort or someone from the opposing side found out that he and Hermione were in a relationship? That thought made chills run down his spine. No, it would be infinitely worse. Would they dare to capture her and use her against him? Try to lure him out? Kill her, even?

No.

None of those things would ever happen, ever. He would rather die than let Malfoy or anyone else take her.

His mind had slowed down sometime after, and though all was relatively quiet in his head, he still couldn't sleep. So he lay there instead, still holding Hermione's hand, still listening to her breathing. His eyes felt heavy and dry, and he wanted more than anything to go to sleep, so his troubling thoughts from mere moments ago would not trouble him for a while.

It had seemed that he had been granted his wish; his eyes were closed and he could feel himself descending into a deep slumber.

But then she began to stir.

He had shot up right away, kneeling beside her on the bed, and looked to see if she was awake. She wasn't. She was frowning and her face was white and she was sweating, mumbling incoherent things that he could not make sense of.

His alarm grew with every phrase she uttered, his green eyes searching her face for signs of consciousness.

"Please, don't," she had mumbled, raising her arms to shove at an imaginary attacker.

"Don't what?" he'd breathed, not knowing what to do.

"Don't kill him," she whispered, tears sliding down the sides of her face.

Harry froze.

She had begun to twist in her sheets then, her words slurring together into fast, barely incomprehensible sentences.

He had listened to it all intently, the dread inside him growing steadily.

When she began to claw at the air and shout for Dream Malfoy to get off of her, Harry lightly tapped her cheeks and eyes, telling her to wake.

"Please wake up, Hermione; it's just a dream, wake up!"

She only cried out louder and succeeded in leaving a long, bloody scratch on his arm.

Harry ignored the pain, looking down at Hermione. His palm still cupped the side of her face, where her tears ran over his fingers as he made soothing 'shh' noises.

They remained that way for a while, Hermione's struggles finally ceasing, and her cries had dissolved into nothing. Harry let out a shaky breath. She had fallen asleep again, though her hair was wild and knotted and her eyes were red and puffy. He ran his hand over her head, smoothing her hair, before he collapsed back onto the mattress, holding her hand firmly.

Light was beginning to peek through the sliver of space between her curtains, highlighting a slim section of the wall beside the bed.

Hermione's eyes opened, and she sat up stiffly, wondering why her arms were so sore. Her face felt tight and bleary and once she looked over at Harry, who had scratches and cuts and bruises on his arms and face, she instantly knew what had happened.

He awoke to the sensation of being stared at, and he sat up, concerned, when he saw she was crying.

"I'm sorry about that," she said softly, as she touched her wand to his skin to heal the wounds she had created.

"It's nothing," he insisted, and then paused. Did she know?

"Do you remember what you dreamt last night?"

Hermione crossed her arms, looking out towards the window at the beam of light protruding from the gap in her curtains. There were dark circles under her eyes. Harry watched as she closed them, and spoke.

"I saw him kill Dumbledore, and then he was strangling me again, trying to touch me."

Harry's reached out and caught her in a close embrace, brushing his lips against her forehead.

"I tried to wake you, but you couldn't hear me." She nodded, but said nothing.

"Do you want to talk to Madam Pomfrey or Professor McGonagall?"

She shook her head.

"Can we go outside?" she asked. "I can't stand being inside any longer."

She asked this with trepidation, thinking he might refuse and start going on about her safety.

Harry pondered for a moment. "Alright. But you are aware that it's the middle of the day, and we are technically skipping class?"

He was expecting Hermione to turn pale and hit him for not waking her earlier and to rush madly about, gathering her things to run to class.

Instead, he was appalled and deeply concerned when she simply shrugged.

"I don't feel like going to class," she said, slipping on her coat.

He was sitting in the lavender field by the pond, letting the cool breeze wash over him, enveloping him in the scent of the plants around him. It reminded him of her.

Of course it did, which was why he'd had his gardener plant this small field. The color added a refreshing feel to the area, which was mostly green. The wind mussed his hair, making it fly around his head and into his eyes, but he didn't mind. His mind was elsewhere employed.

He'd had the most interesting dream the night before. In it, he had found himself in a memory of his Fifth year.

He remembered that day clearly; it was early November, and the scenery around the school was a mesmerizing blend of oranges and reds and yellows and everything in between, like the school itself was shrouded in a gentle fire. It had been a fine morning; he'd woken in a good mood and had treated himself to a delicious green apple with a stack of toast before deciding to go out for a stroll, since he still had about an hour till class began.

The leaves crunched under his feet as he made his way towards the lake, contentedly biting into another apple. The lake was just up ahead, and he headed straight for it, hoping to have some time alone to relax and maybe even sleep a bit. The day before had been a tough one, he and Granger had got into a rather heated argument. They had been assigned as partners for their Ancient Runes class, and had to work on a research essay together. Neither would have been caught dead in the others' respective Common Room, and he absolutely refused to meet at the library, so they had decided on the empty Charms classroom after dinner.

He didn't even remember how it started, but she had been her usual prissy self, bossing him around like he was her own House Elf, and when he told her off, using a few choice words, her face had gone scarlet and she snapped at him to help her search the stack of books she had already acquired for what they were looking for. When he had reminded her to say please, she glared at him and remained silent, much to his annoyance. He had jabbed at her then, piling the insults till she kicked him. From there it had escalated until they were shouting at each other, and it seemed they would have remained arguing all night had she not abruptly gotten up from her seat and stalked out the door, summoning her things after her.

He hadn't seen her at breakfast. Perhaps she'd gone to blubber to Potter and Weasel about how rude and immature Big Bad Malfoy was. Frowning, he bit into his apple with a satisfyingly violent crunch, and quickened his pace.

He had finished his apple by the time he reached the small wood that lay before the lake, carelessly tossing the core to the side.

Here, the leaves were still soft and fresh, and did not crunch under his step. With each step he felt his foot sink a little into the soft layer of leaves that blanketed the ground. He navigated his way through, and finally decided to sit down at the base of a handsome birch tree, but not before conjuring a blanket to sit upon so his robes wouldn't get filthy.

He had sat there for some time, not really thinking, just staring at his surroundings, though what his eyes saw didn't really sink into his mind. A breeze danced through the scene, and he listened to the leaves and branches rustling around him. He could faintly hear the waters of the lake moving about, lulling him into a trance-like state.

He wasn't quite sure when he had fallen asleep, but he awoke calmly, his eyes focusing instantly once he had opened them. Something felt different. Something had changed.

The wind had picked up, for one, whistling in his ears and fluttering his clothing with its force. But that wasn't it.

He stood, looking around him, reaching out and placed his palm flat against the trunk of the tree he had been sitting against.

An odd sound reached him and he turned, trying to detect from which direction it had come. It was a voice, that much he knew, but it had come by so quickly and so faintly he was not able to determine whether it was male or female.

Was someone spying on him?

There it was again. This time, he heard it more clearly, and he quickly went to the direction it had come from, fingering his wand in his pocket.

He had not gone far when he stumbled across the source of the noise.

*It **had** to be Granger, of all people. He'd fought not to roll his eyes.*

What caught him off guard was the fact that she was laying on her back, curls spread about her and hands resting atop her ribs, Gryffindor robes being rubbed into the leaves and soil beneath her. He was aghast, disgusted. Whereas he had actually taken precautions to make sure he would not get his robes dirty, she was lying there without a care.

In the dirt where she belongs, he'd thought with malice.

Was this how Muggles were? Undoubtedly, he'd told himself, still watching her.

Perhaps he should scare her. Throw water on her? Dirt? Aim a hex or two? The possibilities were endless.

It was hard to tell if she was sleeping or not, since a curly lock had fallen in such a way as to conceal her eyes from him. All he saw was the lower half of her face. Still, she was not moving, so he figured her to be asleep and made his choice.

He had just begun to take a step forward when she stirred, her left hand moving from her abdomen to place itself underneath her head as a makeshift pillow. He tensed, breathing as quietly as possible. Luckily, she did not turn. But now that he knew she was awake, he ducked behind the nearest tree, taking care to not move too quickly so she wouldn't detect his movement out of the corner of her eye.

When he looked back at her, he found that she had not moved much, only now he could see her eyes. The girl was looking up into the sky; a sad tilt curved her lips as the trees whispered around her. At that moment it occurred to him that he had better leave; it was no use trying to pull a prank on her if she was wide awake. And it was about time he headed back to go to class. These were the reasons he gave himself to ignore the fact that he was intruding on what to her must have been a private moment.

Should he have felt wrong watching her in this manner? He was practically spying on her, for Merlin's sake. A day ago he'd called her a dirty Mudblood bitch and now here he was behind a tree, watching that same girl lie on the grass, consumed with her thoughts. Anyone else might have felt wrong. What did he feel?

Nothing.

Or is that just what I want to hear? he'd asked himself. Something felt way off about all this and to be honest, he wasn't sure what he felt just now. There had been the initial anger at finding her here but what had that turned into? Draco didn't have a fucking clue, and that annoyed him. It was hard to take his eyes off her and that was strange too. This was a rare occasion that he'd found her without a book or a roll of parchment in her hands, without that bossy look on her face or that posture that suggested she had a broom up her arse. It was like the Yule Ball in Fourth Year all over again. What had she done?

Just as he began to turn away, she began to hum. His head whipped back around to face her, and his ears strained to hear her of the chatter of the rustling leaves above him. He listened intently as she quietly sang to herself, wondering why exactly his feet would not obey his mind's orders to get out of there and go back to the castle. He had heard her hum before. He'd catch her in the library, or in their common room, her voice barely audible as she breathed out the music in her head. She usually didn't know that he could hear her, either. For

some reason he had never complained about it. But something had been different about that time. Usually, in the few instances he'd heard her, her voice, although quiet and contained, had sounded cheerful, or normal, for want of a better word.

But then, as he stood there, hidden behind the thick trunk of one of the many trees that surrounded them, her melody filled him, and he suddenly realized how sad she sounded. Which was strange, because when had he ever heard or seen Hermione Granger to be sad? The girl was made of fire and ice, for Merlin's sake! The girl rarely cried; she made others cry! At least, that's what he'd heard. He briefly wondered if her sorrow had anything to do with those two dunces she hung around so much. It couldn't be, though. No matter what kind of argument those three would get into, they usually made up quickly, and from what he had heard, none of their fights were ever truly damaging. So Potter and Weasley were out of the question.

And then he'd frozen and the reality of the situation struck him at last. Why on Earth was he trying to figure out why she was upset? He didn't care for her at all! He had ignored the voice in his head that urged him to stop thinking and just listen to her voice, to listen at how beautiful she sounded, how he thought she may have been crying but couldn't tell, because due to the breeze, that damned lock of hair had fallen over her eyes again. He simply pushed that voice out of his mind, and silently, he fled the scene.

Draco grasped a short stalk of lavender and pulled it from the ground, gaze still lost in the waters of the pond. His mind had gone elsewhere again, his eyes had unfocused but his hands remained alert; they ran softly, reverently over the delicate little petals on the stalk as his hair moved in the wind.

12. Invincible

Chapter Twelve: Invincible

"I want to find you, tear out all your tenderness,"

Howl-Florence and the Machine

Draco jolted awake, blinking furiously to clear the drowsiness in his eyes.

He was covered in sweat, his sheets clung to his pale skin, twisting around his legs and tangling in his arms. His boxers were hot and sticky, he could feel the result of his dream on his thighs.

What a dream.

His body ached-not out of pain, but desire. His penis was still erect, his hips ached to push into a body; a live, heated body, pulsing with blood and desire, not what was his dream had conjured for him. He pushed his hair back and cleared the mess wandlessly as he sat up in his bed, panting slightly.

His other hand was clenched into a tight fist; he must have had it that way for a while because his hand muscles were stiff and sore when he opened his hand.

Inside was her hair ribbon, the pink one he had taken from her room before the mission.

He wondered how he had got it in his sleep, seeing as he had set it on his desk earlier, but it didn't matter. He rubbed the piece between his fingers and brought it to his nose. It still faintly smelled like her.

Snippets of the dream flashed through his mind: a tangle of curls in his fist, a red mouth parted in a scream, soft white skin that made his nerves sing as he touched it. Mouths pressed together, her soft lips yielding to his demanding kisses, hands that explored freely, greedily taking in every detail, every curve. A heat that threatened to engulf him.

He had not seen her entire face or body in the dream, only brief glimpses of a certain part, a snatch of skin, a trembling chin, small hands, a wide eye, a fine leg.

Oh, but he had *heard* her.

Little cries and moans, desperate noises tumbling from her throat and past her plump lips that only served to drive his need further and further 'til he thought it could never be satisfied. He thought of the last time he had seen her, when he had held her pulsing throat in his hands as she kicked and twisted and scratched to get him away. He could still feel her warmth. In fact, at times, he could still feel her skin underneath his fingers, even though she was nowhere nearby.

He swore softly.

This was the fourth time he had had this dream, the first of them taking place the previous Sunday. Coincidentally it was Sunday again, and it was three in the morning as well. Draco tore his sheets away from his body and reached for the lamp beside his bed.

Now that there was some light, he stood and walked over to the bureau where an old Daily Prophet lay, the yellowed edges of its pages crumbling.

MALFOY ATTACKS IN HOGSMEADE, the headline blared up at him.

His eyes skimmed over the article, taking in the words but not really reading them. He knew them by heart, anyhow. A picture of him had been placed in the center of the front page, along with the details of the attack. What he found amusing was that they had not revealed whom he had attacked. Also omitted from the story was the involvement of Potter and Weasley.

Of course they wouldn't mention them, they're already under much speculation as it is, he thought. They know I tried to grab her before, and what with Potter's design to defeat Voldemort...

Irritation swelled up inside him but he forced it back down.

You lost control once, and if you let that happen again, it's all over, he scolded himself as he tossed the paper back down.

It had been weeks since then, and though he worked at finding another way to take her, he was no closer than he had been on the first day. His spy was tracking the girl, reporting everything back to him in case he could find something useful. He had bits and pieces, but he needed much more to be able to formulate a concrete plan.

But damn it all, as much as he loved this hunt, it was taking its toll on him.

His dallies in Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley with the random witches had ceased long ago. He was in no danger of being caught or linked to the kidnappings and murders, of that he was sure. But he was tired of the next best thing. He wanted the *real* thing.

He wanted her.

He could think of nothing else, of no one else.

He craved her, he *needed* her.

Each day that passed by that he did not have her, he could feel his frustration growing and morphing into a ravenous, dangerous beast that demanded her with every step, with every breath. He wished nothing more than to be able to simply walk into the great castle where the cherished princess was kept and claim her right there before hoarding her in his domain like the dragon he was.

If only it were that easy. He sighed.

A quick glance at his clock told him ten minutes had passed since he had risen. He briefly entertained the idea of going back to bed, but decided he had rather not. He was wide awake now so it would be pointless to go to bed again. His body itched for movement, and he stretched as he walked into his bathroom. He would need to make some 'calls' later.

The common room was empty and that was how she liked it.

Neville was rarely there anymore other than at night, he usually spent most of the day with Luna as soon as they were out of class. A while ago, Hermione would have been sad that she barely spent any time with him anymore, but now, she realized she preferred being alone, unless Harry or Ron were around. But at the moment, both were outside training for an upcoming Quidditch match. She couldn't remember if they were against either Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff, but it didn't matter.

It struck her as odd, the way they had been acting lately. Ron seemed to be stuck in a bad mood most of the time-on several occasions already he and she had got into silly little arguments over practically nothing. When he wasn't grouchy, however, she could plainly read there was guilt hiding in his eyes. She had inquired many times if he was okay, what was wrong, and if she could help, but each time the guilty look would worsen and he would hastily assure her nothing was wrong, and leave. Harry was mum on the subject as well, whatever it was. This frustrated her greatly, as she wanted to know what was going on with them. Part of her felt as though she were to blame; with everything that had happened, now Harry and Ron were constantly worried about her, fretting over every little thing that might upset her. She felt eternally grateful for them; for where would she be if they had not rescued her?

She had sat down on the couch with the intent to knock a few homework assignments out of the way but she had done that far too quickly, and had been left with nothing to do but continue reading. It was too cold outside for her to take a walk, and the library held little appeal for her on a day such as this. She had only ever gone back to her favorite spot once, earlier in the year, when she had wanted to be alone, but upon reaching it, she had been engulfed in a nightmarish memory of what had happened the last time she had been there.

She had not been back since. Hermione wanted nothing to do with the place after Malfoy and his despicable actions had besmirched it. That didn't mean she didn't miss it, though. That little spot in the library had been like a second home to her; a refuge of sorts, and she couldn't help but feel an intense hatred towards *him* for ruining it for her.

Now all she had was here, the Head Students dorm, and the Gryffindor Tower, the latter in which she spent less time than she would have liked to admit. Since the ambush, Harry and Ron had spent as much time as they could with her, and while most of the time their presence was welcome and enjoyable, at times she couldn't help but feel smothered. Which was why today, though they had not wanted to go to the practice, she had all but kicked them out of the room for some alone time.

She shifted in her seat so that she lay down on her back, and held the book just above her so she could still read its contents, though a bit awkwardly.

"Hermione."

She looked up, surprised at the sudden harsh voice that had broken her moment of peace.

Neville stood in front of her, arms crossed and a scowl on his face.

"What?" she asked stupidly, blinking. She had been lost in thought before he had accosted her; until now she had not realized she had been reading the same sentence over and over

repeatedly for the last fifteen minutes. She thought she heard an odd sound by the door but could not ponder on it further because Neville was speaking again.

"This has to stop," he said, gesturing at her.

Now Hermione was utterly perplexed. "My studying? What are you talking about?"

"No, not that," he said impatiently. "You haven't been yourself at all this year."

"People change," she said dismissively.

"Not like you have," he said. "You're not the Hermione I used to know. You're a shadow."

"What is this all about?" Hermione demanded.

"You know it's true," he said.

Hermione sat up and closed her book, placing it upon her lap. "I can't be happy every second of every day when all this has happened. I've been through a lot, Neville. Surely you can understand that?"

More than you know, Neville thought sadly as he looked at her.

"Of course I understand, Hermione. But this isn't you. One thing I've always admired about you is that you never back down. You never let anything get to you. But now you're scared all the time—even if Harry and Ron can't see it, I can."

"I was *attacked*, Neville. He tricked me and—"

"I know it was Malfoy."

Hermione stared at him, wide-eyed.

"Harry told me everything that happened last year."

Upon seeing her face tighten with anger, he added, "He only told me because he was concerned about you, Hermione. He wanted me to look out for you. Don't get mad at him."

Hermione closed her eyes and cleared her throat.

"If you know, then surely Harry told you what he did."

"He didn't go into specifics," Neville said, "But from what he said, it was pretty bad."

"If you know that much, and if you know that he attacked me and tried to kidnap me, then how-how can you expect me to act like everything is okay?" she asked, clenching and unclenching her fists.

"No—that's not what I meant—"

"THEN WHAT?" she shouted suddenly, making him jump. "WHAT *DID* YOU MEAN?"

"Please calm down, Hermione," Neville pleaded nervously.

"DON'T YOU BLOODY DARE TELL ME TO CALM DOWN, NEVILLE LONGBOTTOM," Hermione screeched. "HOW WOULD YOU FEEL IF YOU'D BEEN STALKED AND HARASSED FOR A YEAR AND THEN NEARLY KIDNAPPED

TWICE? HOW WOULD YOU FEEL IF YOU WERE TRICKED INTO TRUSTING SOMEONE YOU THOUGHT COULD HELP YOU?"

At this point, Neville was cringing at her words—he felt very stupid for having brought her to this state. Tears were streaming down her face, her nose had turned red and there were two pink splotches on her cheekbones to attest to her anxiety.

"TELL ME, HOW WOULD YOU FEEL IF SOMEONE HAD BEEN KILLED BECAUSE OF YOU? AND YOU COULDN'T PREVENT SOMEONE ELSE'S DEATH?"

She made a choking sound then, and covered her face with her hands, turning away from him, her shoulders hunching over.

"Don't you dare pretend to know what I've been through," she brokenly whispered.

A terse silence permeated the space between them, neither saying another word.

Neville was at a loss. He had never seen her this way. Of course, he had seen her snap at Harry and Ron before, it was a common occurrence that the rest of the Gryffindor House be treated to a random showing of Hermione berating the two young men for reasons aplenty. But she seemed utterly deflated now, and it scared him.

"Please leave," she whispered hoarsely.

"I'm not leaving you like this," Neville declared. "You can't keep doing this to yourself."

"Doing what, exactly?" she asked angrily, impatiently batting an errant curl out of her eye.

"You're letting him win, Hermione," he said exasperatedly. "You have to fight it."

"How?" Hermione breathed.

"You've always been strong. Don't lose that," he pleaded. She made no answer for a moment, she simply stared blankly out the window at the darkened sky.

"I'm not invincible, Neville," she whispered.

"I never said you have to be," he said carefully. "I only mean that you have to move past this. What he did to you was horrible and wrong, but it could have been worse. What matters is you are alive and well, and he can't get at you again. We'll make sure of it."

She nodded absently, and he worried that she did not believe him.

Wiping at her cheeks, Hermione stood slowly and shuffled over to Neville to wrap her arms around him. Neville stroked her head, which was buried into his shoulder.

"Thank you," she said quietly, and before he could reply she had broken the embrace and shut herself into her room.

The next day after the double Transfiguration lesson with Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, Hermione and Neville were pulled aside by Professor McGonagall, who advised them to begin planning for the upcoming Christmas ball.

Both she (Prof. McGonagall) and Neville were cautious in their approach on the topic, since they both knew what had happened at the last two balls, and while Hermione appreciated the sentiment, didn't really care much for the event. Of course she would help prepare it, but she simply would not go. Hermione had not bothered to tell either of them this, nor was she planning to. She simply would not go. She knew Harry and Ron would understand-at least, she hoped they would. She decided then she would go to the Gryffindor Common Room to speak to Ginny, as she hadn't spoken to her in a few days.

Hermione turned on the spot and headed in the opposite direction of which she had been going, since she had been headed back to her dorm before she had made the quick decision. Neville had gone off in search of Luna after their conference with McGonagall, and Harry and Ron were in the library, rushing to finish a Potions essay that was due later. Hermione quickened her pace, taking care not to bump into any of the nearby students. She nodded and smiled at those who greeted her in passing, but made no move to stop and have a chat. She felt on edge all of a sudden.

It was an odd feeling, as though someone or something was dragging a sheet of foil over her skin, making her feel prickly and strange. She cast a furtive glance around herself and noticed nothing out of the ordinary, and that reassured her a little. It was warm in the busy corridor so she raised her arms and began to twist her hair into a tight bun, finishing it with the elastic on her wrist. Just as she lowered her arms she walked right into Filch, who had been bent over scraping at something on the floor with a filthy mop.

"Sorry," she sputtered, stepping away.

She half expected him to yell at her. Instead, she was surprised (and relieved) when he merely clamped his lips shut and glared at her fiercely, his jowls quivering. She stood there stupidly for a second before she grimaced and walked away, raising her brows.

What was his problem? She wondered as she turned round a corner. He was probably having a very bad day, or maybe he just got crankier every year. Shaking her head, she pushed the incident out of her mind and continued on her way.

13. Before Everything Changes

Chapter Thirteen: Before Everything Changes

It was only a few days until the ball, and only a few days more until the Holidays began. The entirety of the Hogwarts population (save for a certain Potions Professor) was eagerly anticipating the day of the ball. Neville and Hermione had worked hard, as usual, to ensure that the event would be perfect. They had ultimately decided not to theme the ball this year, it was a Christmas ball and that was good enough for them. Hermione was still caught on the idea of not going, she had explained this to Harry and Ron, who accepted her decision, though they still randomly attempted to convince her to go.

"It's our last ball, Hermione!" Ron had pleaded once. "This is our last year, and before everything changes, we should have one last bit of fun."

Though his argument was convincing, Hermione would not relent. She simply did not feel like going, and that was that. And besides, she and Harry had made plans to spend some time together on the night of the ball. Due to the semester exams that had been going on lately, Hermione had been far too busy studying for her various classes to meet with him.

Then there was her talk with Ginny, which had taken place the day before.

"*What do you mean, you're not going?*" Ginny asked.

Hermione had winced, covering her ears with her hands. It was lucky there was no one in the girls' dormitory at the moment-everyone was at dinner. She had caught Ginny after their Charms lesson and had asked to speak to her privately, and seeing as Ginny had wanted to bring her books back up to her room, this had been the best option for their talk.

"Are you absolutely mad? It's your last year! This'll be the last Hogwarts Christmas ball you'll go to! You must go!" The redheaded witch strode over to the brunette and grabbed her hands, looking into her eyes seriously. Blue eyes searched brown and Hermione tried as best as she could not to blink. She didn't know what Ginny was looking for, but after a few seconds, she seemed to have found it, for she sighed and released her hands.

"There's something you're not telling me," she said flatly.

Hermione forced out a laugh. "It's really not that complicated, Ginny. I've simply grown tired of these dances and I don't feel up to attending another one."

"Well, no one said you have to stay all night, but you could just pop in for an hour or two," she suggested. "Have a dance with Harry and Ron and Neville, even, and save one for me, because I hardly saw you at the last ball." She raised her pale brows and rolled her eyes upward innocently.

"I'll consider it," Hermione said. "Really, I will," she added when she saw the dour look on Ginny's face.

“I’m not going to force you to go,” Ginny said, placing her hand on Hermione’s shoulder, “You do whatever you think is best for yourself, okay?”

Hermione nodded, and they hugged.

“I’m going to miss you lot,” Ginny whispered. Hermione held her more tightly, wondering if anything would be the same in the upcoming year.

“We’ll be fine,” she said softly, “It’ll all be over before you know it.”

Now, she was just leaving her last class of the day, Arithmancy. An hour of numbers and problem solving and logical thinking had been just what she needed, a sense of control. It had been very refreshing, and she found herself in a better mood than she had been in since her confrontation with Neville. And what helped elevate her mood was the fact that she had a free double period now. All that planning for that wretched ball and studying for her exams had left her quite tuckered out, so she was planning to take a nap, which she was looking forward to.

She entered the Head dorm and slipped inside her room, not bothering to change out of her uniform, but she did take off her tie and shoes, and climbed into her bed, eyes already heavy. As her head settled into the pillow, she thought perhaps she would go to the ball for a while. It wouldn’t hurt, would it? She would have a bit of fun and then leave before anything bad could happen...

14. Hurt

Chapter Fourteen: Hurt

Harry's hands around her waist felt warm and familiar, very much unlike Malfoy's large, cold, strong palms that gripped her tightly and refused to let her go.

Hermione tutted at herself. Why was she bringing Malfoy back into her thoughts? She was here to forget, for Merlin's sake! Very soon, things would start to change and the war would intensify, very soon, she, Harry and Ron would embark on their quest to find the remaining Horcruxes and bring down Voldemort. This was a constant thought in her mind, hovering over her mind like a rain cloud, threatening to obliterate any happiness or peace she might find.

But not now. Not tonight.

Tonight she was determined to forget everything that had happened in the past year, every bad thing, and simply enjoy what time she had left before everything changed.

She caught Ron's eye from across the Great Hall and winked as he sent her a bright smile. He was dancing with Romilda Vane. She felt Harry's lips pressing softly into her shoulder, and she smiled at him as they ended their dance.

"Feeling alright?" he asked as he led her away from the dance floor.

"Never better," Hermione said airily as they sat down at their table. It was true, too. The night had been just what she had wanted, a good distraction. She had danced with Ginny and Luna and Neville, of course. Even Ron had asked her to dance. Though he had seemed a bit distracted, he had been at his best and had made her laugh till her belly hurt. Several times she had caught him staring at her with a sad smile on his face, and when asked what was wrong, he would cough and stutter and change subjects.

Neville and Luna were sitting to Hermione's right, looking content, but tired. It was about time, too, for the two had been dancing all night, and she had often wondered were they not tired at all. Luna's face was sweaty and flushed from all the dancing, but there was a bright glint in her eyes that matched her ruffled silver dress that hinted her fatigue would not stand in the way of her having fun that night. Neville, on the other hand, seemed like he was on the verge of collapsing, his eyelids drooping and he slid further down into his chair little by little, much to Hermione's amusement. She watched as Luna leaned over and grabbed his hand and he immediately seemed to come to life again, sitting straighter and he sent her an adoring smile.

Ron approached the table then, and they all took notice of his ruffled coif and red face, which was just as red as his trademark hair.

"Where's Romilda?" Harry asked as Ron sat beside him.

“Went to the loo,” Ron replied, taking a sip from his goblet of water.

Hermione hid her laugh with a well-timed cough and turned to Harry. He had been watching her with guarded eyes so she could not tell if he was happy or simply lost in thought. He had placed his hand atop hers, she had not noticed, and was stroking her skin with his thumb as he gazed at her.

“Is something wrong?” she asked quietly. Though she could not read his eyes, she could read the sad curve in his lips well, and could tell something was troubling him.

“You look stunning tonight,” he whispered back and she blushed, smiling into her glass of water.

“And you look quite the gentleman as well,” she said. “If only we could do something about your hair.”

She was teasing him; his hair had been gelled and spelled into perfection for the occasion, and for once, his usually unruly locks were not sticking out in every direction. All the same, Harry smoothed his hand over his hair nervously.

Hermione stilled his arm. “Relax, darling, you look fine.”

He stood up then, straightening his suit, and offered her his hand.

“Feel like taking a break?” he asked. In response she took his hand and stood, smoothing her dress.

“I’ll be back later to help you clean up,” she told Neville.

“Don’t worry about it,” Neville assured her. “I can manage.”

Hermione was about to concede when Harry cut in. “She’ll help. You’ll finish faster that way.”

Harry ignored the confused look Neville and Hermione gave him and turned to Ron. They exchanged a serious glance. Harry nodded to Ron, raising his eyebrows, and when Ron nodded and looked away, he departed from the table still holding onto Hermione’s wrist, and led her from the Great Hall and into the hallway.

“What was that about?” Hermione asked as he led her up the stairs.

Harry feigned indifference, clouding the turmoil in his mind as he pulled her along.

“Nothing. I just think you should spend more time with Neville before we leave.”

“But we’re not leaving yet!” Hermione protested, frowning. His grip on her wrist had tightened by a fraction, and he was tugging her up the stairs, so quickly she almost tripped over her gown.

“Harry, what’s going on?” she asked. She didn’t dare pull out of his grasp in fear of falling down the stairs or tripping over her dress so she endeavored to keep up. He stopped suddenly, giving her an apologetic look.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I just wanted to be alone with you.”

Hermione sighed. “You could have said that from the start. I was beginning to worry.”

“We can go back if you want,” he said.

“No,” she said. “I didn’t mean to stay there long anyway. I’d rather be with you.”

Harry smiled and they resumed walking.

She had thought they would be going to the Gryffindor Tower, but instead he veered them in the direction of the Head dorms.

They were the only ones in the corridor, since everybody else was back at the Great Hall. Their footsteps echoed around them, and Hermione shivered as the cold air touched her skin. Still Harry said nothing, he didn’t look back or let go of her hand.

They had reached the entrance. Hermione have the password and they stepped in, Hermione giggling as she almost tripped through the entrance. Harry caught her and helped her through.

He stepped forward, catching her between himself and the wall. He held her face lightly in his palms and he stared at her for a moment, his green eyes boring into her brown ones, as though he was trying to memorize them.

“Harry?” she asked.

He pressed a soft kiss onto her lips. Hermione stared up at him, eyes wide with confusion.

“I love you,” he breathed into her lips before kissing her again, more deeply than before. His hands left her face, one cupped the back of her head, and the other wrapped around her waist, pressing her more firmly into him. Leaning into him more closely, she brought her hands to his shoulders, her fingertips grazing the sides of his neck.

Hermione could not reply, his mouth was attached to hers, his hands now trailing down to her bum and below, to the backs of her thighs and he crouched, with one swift movement he had picked her up so she had her knees around him.

Hermione yelped with surprise, laughing, and gripped his shoulders more tightly as he carefully yet quickly walked to her room. His lips were on her collarbones, nipping and kissing as he pushed open her door and stumbled to the bed.

In the next instant, she found herself sprawled on her own bed, the skirt of her dress riding up to her thighs as Harry crawled atop her, ridding himself of some of his clothing.

Desire rippled through her, settling between her hips. Hermione could see a strain at the front of Harry’s trousers and went still.

A bubble of fear and unease welled up inside her and she let out a whimper as his hand trailed up her exposed leg, pushing the fabric of her dress farther up.

As if he had read her mind, he pressed a kiss to her neck.

“Don’t be frightened,” he whispered. “I would never hurt you.”

She nodded and took a deep breath as she reached to her side and pulled the zipper of her dress down, and smiled self consciously as Harry helped her slide out of the red fabric, wiggling her hips to get the last of it off her legs. Despite her ease with Harry unsettling

memories with another person began to resurface, and she turned her head away, blushing, thinking back to the last time she had been in a situation similar to this one.

His fingers gripped her chin and turned her back to face him.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” he murmured.

“I can’t help but remember...” Hermione rubbed at her forehead as if that would erase the memories.

“If you don’t want to, we won’t,” Harry said.

“I want to,” she said, a little more eager than she wanted. “Just-not too fast.”

Harry kissed her softly in agreement.

Slowly, she led his hands to her breasts, still kissing as he massaged them gently, and the tips of his fingers ghosted over her nipples, which pebbled under his touch. Hermione let out a quiet moan, which only grew louder when he took one in his mouth. He worked at her nipple with his tongue, flicking and laving it while his other hand squeezed her other breast-carefully, carefully, carefully. He sucked on her nipple, once, twice, three times, each harder than the last, and each time her body arched to meet his mouth, a hoarse sound drawing long and guttural from her throat.

Her skin felt like it was on fire, her breasts felt so much more sensitive under his touch, and she moaned, running her hands down his back. Her body pulsed-she was acutely aware of his body between her legs.

Harry freed her nipple, panting, and kissed her on the mouth, his teeth dragging on her lower lip. Hermione sighed into his mouth and pressed her hands over his back. He had removed his shirt, so she took the opportunity to explore the feel of his muscles and shoulder blades as they moved in accordance with his actions.

His hands moved down her body, taking in the curves of her hips and slipped down to the apex of her thighs, which was covered by her simple underwear.

“Is this too much?” he asked, his voice a little raw.

His nearness was electrifying. Hermione closed her eyes, willed her body to calm, to stop the rush of wetness at the press of his knee against her inner thigh, insisting to her heart to slow its beat.

But they wanted more.

“Not enough,” she said, drawing him closer, angling for that friction again.

He leaned closer to her lower body. Hermione watched as he removed her panties, she raised her hips and allowed him to slide them off her legs and banish them to the dark corners of her room.

His hands went to unbuckle his belt, and that was when she froze. Before he could unzip his pants she quickly reached out, stalling his actions.

“I-I’m not ready for *that* yet,” she said, blushing fiercely.

Immediately he stopped, holding her hands in his own. "Okay," he said.

"I do want to, though," she rushed to clarify. "Only not now."

"I understand," he said. "There's just one thing I'd like to try, if you'd let me."

She looked into his eyes for a second or two. He had such beautiful eyes. So kind and loving and warm, so unlike *his*, whose gaze held nothing but malice and a promise for destruction.

Hermione nodded, and gasped as he leaned forward, gently pulling her thighs apart, and then placed his mouth on her. Her hips jerked in response—she had been resting on her elbows, but the intensity of the shock of desire that had jolted through her had turned her muscles to jelly and she flopped down onto the mattress as he gave her slit one long lick. Her hands locked in and twisted in his hair as she moaned again. Her desire pooled between her thighs and he licked it up like the sweetest honey. Slowly, his fingers rubbed around her clit, varying in pressure from the lightest touch to a firm pressure and she bucked again, shamelessly pressing herself closer to him.

There was a fire kindling inside of her, starting at her toes. It felt like a spring coiling tighter and tighter inside her, and though it felt slightly uncomfortable she found she craved it, needed it to reach something she could not name. She gave a startled 'oh!' when his tongue made direct contact with her clit, stroking at that fire until she felt she would burst, her back was arching into the cold air of her room, her nipples stiff and still red from their ravaging which had taken place moments ago. Harry gripped her thighs, pulling her more closely around him. Feeling his hair tickle her skin, Hermione shuddered and threw her head back into the mattress.

She was so close—inside she was coiling tighter and tighter and she needed to let go else she felt she would snap. Harry worried her lower lips gently, oh so gently, between his teeth, then traveled back up to her clit—his teeth grazed it and she started with surprise, clenching her hands in his hair so tight she might have torn some hairs out. Head buried between her legs, Harry seemed lost to the rest of the world and so was she—all thoughts had gone from her mind and all she knew was the pleasure and her own rising climax. Her whole body burned, throbbed, ached for that release so much that she began to beg, for what she wasn't sure. All she knew was that she needed to let go.

"Please," she gasped, and that was all the invitation he needed to give her clit a hard-pressured lick, and another, and another, his hands massaging her thighs, repeatedly until she cried out as the waves of ecstasy crashed through her, tensing her limbs and stealing her vision so she saw nothing but stars.

Harry watched as she came back down, licking his lips as she lay there, her breathing shallow and quick. He was so hard, his cock ached for attention but he paid it no mind, for tonight was not about him.

Her eyes had closed, but they opened again slowly as he kissed her on the lips, on each cheek, the tip of her nose, her forehead, both her breasts.

"I love you," she whispered. She reached out, tugging at his arms until he laid down beside her, tucking her into him. She was already falling into the clutches of sleep as she shifted her head on her pillow, so she didn't hear his broken whisper as he said

“I’m sorry.”

“Hermione.”

She cracked one eye open, letting her vision focus on Harry as her consciousness began to awaken.

“Yes?”

“The ball is over.”

She stirred. “I should go help Neville.”

“You should.”

His hand on her cheek pressed into her flesh in a loving manner for a second before he got off the bed to search for his shirt. Yawning, Hermione stood and rushed to rearrange her dress, blushing. She had nearly laughed upon finding her knickers spread about the room but now that Harry had seen her, she supposed she should not care so much.

Her hair had been loose for the ball, so she didn’t bother much with it, only used a few minor spells to calm the lionesses’ mane that she had somehow grown when she and Harry had...

Her eyes found him in the darkness of her room, and she went over to him, grabbing his face and pulling his head down so she could give him a kiss.

“Thank you,” she spoke into his lips.

He crushed his lips against hers, perhaps a bit harder than was necessary, but she didn’t mind. His hands held the back of her head as his lips ravaged hers. Hermione frowned.

Something felt off about the kiss. He seemed desperate-pleading, even.

She pulled away, and her eyes searched his.

“Is something wrong?” she asked, cupping his cheek in her palm. He leaned into her touch, closing his eyes.

“Nothing’s wrong. I need to go to the loo, so I’ll see you when you come back up.” He forced a grin onto his face.

“I’ll try not to take too long,” Hermione promised, pecking him once more on the lips before she left the room. She had been too lazy to put her shoes back on, so she supposed she should not have been shocked when her bare feet hit the cold stone floor. She set off down the many flights of stairs towards the Great Hall, passing by the last groups of students who had left the ball.

Hermione absently pressed her fingers to her lips as she made her way. She felt great-better than great, she felt bloody wonderful! Her steps were light and she smiled to herself as she thought back to the way Harry had made her feel, what he had done to her body.

“There you are!”

Neville's voice broke into her thoughts, and she blushed, for a moment having thought he knew what she had been thinking of.

"Another ball, another success," he went on as they entered the Great Hall. "It's a shame you didn't stay longer, we could have had more fun."

Hermione looked around the great room. The tables had been cleared and there was no garbage on the floor, and most of the decorations had been taken down.

"I took the liberty of starting the cleanup before you got here," he admitted. "There's really not much left to do, I'm sure we could finish in a matter of minutes, unless you want to go get some shut eye early."

Hermione withdrew her wand from a secret pocket in her dress.

"Nonsense," she said. "We'll do it together."

Just as Neville had predicted, the duo had finished cleanup in record time, jesting and acting silly as they normally did when in each other's presence. They were currently on their way up the stairs, each looking forward to getting some rest before the next day came, when the students would be leaving for the holiday.

"I'm thinking of making some hot chocolate before bed, would you like some?" Hermione asked Neville.

He blushed and stammered a bit before saying, "Well, actually, Luna invited me to hang out in the Ravenclaw common room. We won't be able to see each other over the holiday, so we figured we might spend as much time with each other as possible before then."

"Seems a fine idea," Hermione said, grinning.

They had reached the sixth floor.

"This is my stop," Neville said, and they came to a halt.

"If I don't see you on the train tomorrow, have a good holiday, Hermione," he said, hugging her tightly.

"You as well," she said, smiling warmly. "I'll miss you."

"And I," he replied. He turned and began to walk away, but seemed to have changed his mind about something, because he abruptly turned back and strode over to where she still stood.

"Promise me you'll be careful," he said seriously. "Promise me you'll look after yourself. Write me when you're safely home."

"Nothing's going to go wrong, Neville," Hermione chastised. "I'll be safe. We're just staying at the Burrow for the holiday, and it's well protected, so I doubt something will happen."

His expression only darkened, and he held her gaze more intently.

"Humor me."

She sighed.

“Fine,” she snapped. “I promise I’ll be careful and I’ll look after myself.”

The tension in his posture eased a little, and he cracked a small smile before he kissed her forehead and began to walk away backwards.

“I’m making a note of that promise, Granger!” he called. “You better be here when the holidays are over!”

Hermione laughed.

“Count on it, Longbottom!” she teased. “Someone needs to make sure she’s still top of the class.”

He laughed and waved over his shoulder before turning a corner, and smiling to herself, she began the climb back to her dorm.

15. His

Chapter Fifteen: His Wife

*"I got a little bird
I'm gonna take her home
Put her in a cage
And disconnect the phone."
Little Bird-The White Stripes
—0-0-0-0-0-0—*

***"The fabric of your flesh, pure as a wedding dress
Until I wrap myself inside your arms I cannot rest."
Howl-Florence and the Machine***

Yawning, Hermione entered her room looking for Harry. She didn't see him, so she assumed he was still in the loo. She walked to the door, knuckles raised to knock, but the sound of the shower running reached her and she turned back to her room.

Humming softly to herself, she began to pull out a random pair of pyjamas from her dresser, laying it out on the bed. A glance at her window informed her it was still snowing outside. It had been snowing all day; the first snow of the season, and she wrapped her arms around herself as she looked out over the grounds.

There must be several inches of snow already, she thought. I'm glad I'm not out there.

She walked back to her bed then, and was about to unzip the back of her dress when she saw something she had not noticed before. Leaning closer, she discerned it was a letter, poking out from underneath her old scarlet jumper.

She picked it up gingerly. What was all this about?

Her fingers were trembling and she didn't know why, but it annoyed her, so with one fluid motion she ripped open the envelope and pulled out the small sheets of parchment inside.

Her face drained of colour as she read the first four words.

We are so sorry, the letter read.

Sorry? Sorry for what? Her mind asked, but she ignored it and read on.

Don't be mad at Ron, Hermione. This was all my idea. He absolutely refused when I first proposed the idea but later agreed it was for the best. This is to protect you. I know we had

planned to do this later in the year, but after Malfoy attacked you at Hogsmeade, we decided we would leave right after the ball. We have to end this war and put Malfoy in Azkaban or worse for what he's done.

Tears were clouding her eyes, blurring her vision so that she could hardly read the rest. Furiously, she wiped them away.

I understand if you hate me for this but I just want you to know that I'm doing this because I love you. You are everything to me and if Malfoy knows that, then surely the others do as well. If you had come with us, you would be exposed and right in the open for anyone to find. I know we studied all those protection and concealment spells, but I can't take that risk. If Malfoy or any of the others find you, there's no telling what they might do.

There was a strangled sound suddenly and she jumped, looking around wildly, only to realize it had come from her.

Don't come after us, Hermione. Please.

Tomorrow you'll meet Ginny on the train and you'll go to the Burrow for the holiday. You'll be safe there, the Order will be there and there have been Aurors stationed there as well to protect you all.

Please understand I'm doing this because I love you. I told you I would never hurt you and that was a lie, because no doubt this is hurting you. But I would rather have you hate me than in the enemy's control.

Promise me you won't come after us, Hermione. We won't be able to contact you or anyone else until we've found what we're looking for.

I'm so sorry.

I love you.

Horrible, broken sobs wracked her body and she stumbled to the bathroom, blasting open the door with her wand.

Nothing.

The shower was on but the tub was empty. She turned it off and staggered back to her bed.

This couldn't be happening. How *could* they? How *dare* they? Leave her here? She felt numb with shock, and she froze where she stood, feeling her skin turn ice-cold. The letter fell from her hand and landed with a quiet rustling sound on her bed as the panic began to set in. Feeling strangely detached for a second, she grasped her wand and set the note ablaze, watching it curl and cinder in the flames.

They left her.

The rage and fury began to boil inside her, but it was not enough to quell the increasing hysteria growing inside her. They needed her. How *dare* they think they could just leave her here, to be taken care of like a frail princess when they were out to end a war? She had told Harry, time and time again, that she would go with him. All this time, they'd been lying to her. Her heart sank horribly and for a second she thought she might vomit. He had decided

this since the last attack. She felt like an idiot. So that was why they had been acting so strangely.

She hadn't realized she had bolted out of her room until she tripped over her gown and found herself sprawled on the floor of the hallway just outside the Head dorms. Blindly, unaware of the tears sluicing down her face, she scrambled back up and began to run. Her elbows were sore and bleeding but she didn't care about that or the scrapes on her palms. Inwardly, she cursed herself for not having changed before she had set off, or even bringing her charmed purse, which she had kept hidden in her room since the beginning of the year, but she didn't dare go back and waste time. In all her distress Hermione had forgotten about the snow, and would come to regret it.

Her sobs were labored as she ran; she wanted to keep as quiet as possible so no one would hear her and come to investigate. Her vision was blurred and distorted due to her tears, but her feet seemed to know exactly where to take her, because in what seemed like a matter of seconds (though it was really several minutes), Hermione collided into the statue of the humpbacked witch and fell backwards on her backside onto the cold stone floor with a startled cry. Not one to dwindle on pain, she was back up in an instant, shaking with nerves as she whipped her wand out and tapped while shakily whispering "Dissendum."

The secret passage was revealed and without further delay she slipped down into the tunnel.

The note had arrived a few minutes ago, bearing a cryptic message.

She is attempting to run. Expect a special delivery in a moment.

The handwriting was clumsy and unsightly; no doubt the author of the note was not accustomed to writing much. He glared at the scrap of parchment before throwing it into the fire.

Damn it all, it had been only fifteen minutes since its arrival and here he was, waiting for his 'delivery'. He knew full well what the 'package' would entail, and was curious as to why she was running away. Choosing a spy had been a spur of the moment decision— he had merely wanted to keep tabs on her. Merlin knew what on Earth had provoked her to make such a foolish act, but he wasn't complaining. It had turned out to his advantage in the end and he would reap the benefits.

She simply needed to get here first.

The glass structure had finally been completed; mere seconds before he had received the note, in fact. He had rushed to his study immediately afterwards in all his excitement, though he had felt that he had forgotten to do something rather important, he had ignored the feeling and now he couldn't quite remember what it was that he had been going to do.

That didn't matter now, anyway. There were more pressing matters at hand.

It was snowing more heavily in Hogsmeade when she snuck out of the sweet shop, making sure to lock the door behind her and that she had not been seen.

Although— she looked around wildly, shivering though she could not feel the cold due to panic— the snow was heavy and thick; it was hard to see through. No one was outside, as far as she could see. She could feel it catching in her hair, landing and sticking to her skin before melting, not fast enough, though, because more snow was falling over it, forming layers. She brushed it off impatiently and began to run.

They had gone over this many times, marking the route they would take to slip out of the village. Luckily for her, the snow was still light on the ground, and she only slipped once or twice, but always caught her fall, and her footsteps were muffled by the heavily falling snow. She was feeling murderous at this point. She knew they couldn't be far off, unless they had decided to Apparate, but that hadn't been part of the plan, at least, not until they had reached their destination, which was the clearing in the forest, where they would be far enough that no one would hear them Disapparating, and they would be safely out of Hogwarts' tracking shield. Her feet were stiff with the cold she could barely feel, yet she ran past the empty shops and dark buildings until she had reached the woods.

Panting, Hermione leaned against a bare tree trunk, clutching at a stitch in her side. Her breaths expelled from her lips in large puffs that she could see quite clearly in the cold, still air. Her dress was ruined, but she did not care. Her curls were frozen stiff with the snow, and it felt awkward on her scalp and back. She looked down to grab her wand when she caught sight of the footprints.

There were two pairs, and with a thrill in her heart she recognized them instantly as Harry and Ron's. They were recent, which gave her a dizzying sense of hope, which was quickly crushed when she realized the trail would soon be covered by the falling snow. Stiff hair forgotten, she set off again, following the trail of footprints as fast as she could.

"Maybe we should head back," Ron offered quietly, hopefully. "She's probably furious right now, and you know we need her, mate. We can't do this on our own."

They had reached the clearing already. They both stood uncertainly in the center, aware their next move, but neither wanting to initiate the journey, they stood at a standstill.

"We've gone this far," Harry said quietly. "We're doing this to protect her. She'll be safe at Hogwarts now that McGonagall knows and now that there's someone to look after her."

"Mate—" Ron protested.

"You think I don't want to run back? You think I don't hate myself for having done this?" Harry snapped. "I feel like a right arse right now. But she'll get over it. She has to. She'll be safe there; he can't get to her there, not anymore. We will find Malfoy and we will do whatever it takes to bring him down."

Ron was silent. Harry sighed.

"I'm sorry," he said brokenly. "I just can't let anything happen to her. I love her too much to let her put herself in harm's way."

“But it’s her decision to make, not yours,” Ron said.

“I know.”

“We’re not going to go back, are we.”

Harry sighed. It was snowing so thickly he couldn’t even see his breath before him.

“No.”

If she hadn’t felt the cold before, she was really feeling it now. Encrusted with snow, her feet were half frozen and numb, eyelashes were encrusted with snowflakes; even if she rubbed them away, they would be back within seconds. With every step Hermione berated herself for having let herself be so mindless as to forget *shoes*, of all things, but forged on as best as she could, vowing that she would castrate the boys once she found them.

It must have been her tired eyes and overactive mind playing tricks on her, but twice now she had heard a muffled sound somewhere around her. She suspected it must have been a frightened rabbit or something, but that didn’t explain the movement she had sensed behind her just now.

Hermione whirled around, wand brandished, but there was nothing. Heart pounding, she stumbled forward. She could feel her pulse in her temples.

Just for reassurance, she cast a Disillusion charm over herself, and a Muffliato for good measure, and teeth chattering, she began to run again.

“Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“Some odd rustling sound,” Ron said, peering about them.

“Might be a fox,” Harry said dully.

“Right,” Ron said, but he didn’t sound quite convinced.

“Ready to go?”

“... Yeah.”

The footprints were clearer here, and she knew she was close. Indeed, just as she picked up her pace, she could hear a distant voice, which she just barely identified as Ron’s. What were they saying?

Please don’t let them leave just yet!

They were in her view now, she could have cried with relief she was so happy.

Until a loud crunch sounded behind her and with an awful drop in her stomach, she realized she was not alone. Fight or flight kicked in, so hard she couldn't decide what to do and when she did, it was too late. Something knocked into her before she could turn and she fell on her side, her head knocked hard onto a large rock and large, fuzzy black spots danced over her vision, even as she violently struggled against whoever this attacker was who was tying her wrists together and had one hand clamped over her mouth, silencing her cries.

Nononono!

Another struggle caused her to accidentally hit her head against the rock again, and *oh*, how it hurt. Something hot and wet ran down the back of her neck and kicked out with her legs feebly, even as her body was going limp and the last thing she heard was the muffled twin cracks of two persons disappearing, and a second later, she felt herself be sucked into space, spinning wildly away, even as her hands weakly pushed, one last effort to free herself. They were moving quickly, traveling through space, her stomach lurching so violently she feared she was going to sick all over herself. With difficulty, she opened her eyes. Everything was blurry, her ears were ringing so loud she couldn't hear her pained mumblings, but she clearly saw the face of Argus Filch just as unconsciousness claimed her.

He was in study, pacing across the room, pushing his hands through his hair distractedly as he waited.

Why was he taking so long?

He absently kicked at the floor, and stiffened at the noise that erupted in the lower floor. The noise wasn't so unusual. It was more like scuffed footsteps on a smooth floor, but in the otherwise silent Manor, it was as if a troll had just blasted its way through the front door.

Draco let himself shake the tension from his shoulders, straightened his spine.

They had arrived. He ran his tongue over his teeth.

So he hastened down to the main floor and into the foyer, where Filch was staggering under the weight of the girl, whom he was carrying over his shoulder.

"Put her on the chaise," Draco ordered, and watched as the old man dropped the girl onto the furniture like a sack of mulch.

"Gently, you fool!"

Once he had finished, the ancient man straightened as much as his bent spine allowed and turned to him, awaiting his next order. The ancient man's eyes were glossy and unfocused, his posture unnaturally stiff. There was no expression on his face. Had any Hogwarts student seen him then, they would have sensed something to be amiss, for the caretaker always had an unpleasant frown on his lined, sallow face.

Draco turned to the caretaker.

"Get back to Hogwarts. You will forget any of this ever happened. If you are questioned about the girl you will say you last saw her with Potter."

Filch nodded once and exited the Manor. He would have to walk quite a distance before he would be able to get back to the castle. He'd left a Portkey on the dining room table. Filch would have to remember to grab it, or face an even longer road to Hogwarts. Draco didn't bother reminding him. Either he remembered, or he wouldn't. Draco was too occupied to care.

He took a small object out of his pocket and held it tightly in his fist as he surveyed the young woman lying unconscious on his bed.

Her hand lay limp beside her body, nearly dangling off the side of the chaise. His eyes swept over her form, and he took in her frozen feet. Her gown was shredded and soaked through, clinging to her skin. Her hair was wild and dripping wet, he bent down for a closer look, and watched as the last clumps of ice began to melt. Her lips were blue, her skin deathly pale. He tapped his wand against her forehead, muttering a strong heating charm, and watched, fascinated, as the colour returned to her skin. Now that she was dry, he noticed the redness and puffiness around her eyes. He wondered again what on earth could have prompted her to leave the castle in this manner, improperly dressed for the weather, obviously emotionally unbalanced as well, by the look of it.

He looked at her dress. It was a deep, brilliant scarlet, bringing out the paleness of her skin, the pink in her lips and cheeks. It was rather simple, he decided, with a sleeveless bodice that tucked in at her waist and flared out into a full skirt.

There must have been a holiday ball then, he thought.

Funny, he'd forgotten what time of year it was back there.

Sliding one hand underneath her head, and the other under her legs, he picked her up and carried her to his bedroom, placing her gently on his bed.

It wasn't until he had set her down that he found the blood on his hands. He looked at it in shock, thinking he had somehow injured himself, but then he thought twice and looked at the girl. Nothing seemed amiss until he looked closer. A few strands of her hair were streaked with her blood, and worried; he rolled her onto her side and pushed her hair to the side. The injury was right on the back of her skull, somewhere, he couldn't determine exactly where due to her hair covering it, but at least it was not still bleeding. Her hair was matted with blood and he cursed the ancient caretaker loudly for having treated her so roughly.

He called his house-elf to the room and once it had appeared, gave it orders to heal and dress her wounds and to dress her.

"Give her a sleeping potion once she is ready. I will come to check on her once you have finished and then I have some matters to attend to."

The poor elf nodded and snapped its fingers to levitate her to the bath as Draco left the room.

He entered his study and anxiously began to pace around the length of the room. His heart was beating fast, pounding in his chest.

He finally had her.

Finally. It seemed a weight had been lifted off his chest now that she was here; he was elated and anxious to have her already, to claim her. He still held the ring in his fist, the ring that would tie her to him.

He had originally considered holding a private marriage ceremony with only his parents and Blaise to attend, but he didn't want to go through the trouble of planning it out and waiting even longer for her to be his. So he had done some heavy research, learn some ancient spells and had made a few adjustments to the ring. All he had to do was slip it on her finger and she was officially his wife. He was already wearing his ring, of course. It was a simple platinum band, but it was enough for him.

His thoughts kept going back to why she had run from the castle.

Where are Potter and Weasley? He wondered. Why would they not be with her? And why did she leave? Were they the reason she left? What happened at the ball?

So many questions...

It would be a while before he could get the answers. This frustrated him, for he wanted to know, and he wanted to know *now*.

He made his way back to the bedroom, where his elf was just laying the girl down onto his bed. Her blood had stained his sheets, so they had been changed.

"Is there anything else Master would like Bogg to do?" the elf asked.

"Leave us."

Bogg bowed and with a loud *crack*, was gone.

Draco approached the bed, studying her.

Beautiful.

As she always had been. As he had pictured her, dreamt of her, all this time she had been away.

She had been dressed in one of the nightdresses he had got for her, akin to the one she had worn the first time he had slept with her. Her hair was dried and smelled like roses, her curls fanning over the pillows. All traces of the tears she had shed and whatever she had just gone through were gone, as though they had never taken place, and she was just asleep.

Smiling to himself, he took the ring from his pocket and sat on the side of the bed, next to her.

He stroked her temple with his hand, feeling her hair there, the warmth of her head. He picked up her right hand and slid the ring onto her finger, and stiffened as he felt the magic coursing through him, binding them together. He looked down at her again, stroking her curly head.

He was married. Just thinking about it made him want to laugh.

Of course, coming from his lineage, he knew he would have had to marry someday, but he had never seriously thought about it until he knew he wanted her. Once there might have been a voice inside him that would have fretted over the legality and the morale of what he was

doing, but he was a child no longer and had never heeded that voice anyhow. This was what he wanted.

And now she is mine.

Taking care not to hurt her, Draco leaned over and kissed her. It was the first chaste kiss he had ever given her, without lust or desire. He would have to be content with it for now, as he had to go inform his parents of the events that had just transpired. Softly, he kissed her again, relishing the warmth of her lips against his, and stood, looking over her one last time with the faintest proud smile on his lips.

“My wife,” he said to himself. He decided he liked saying it. His wife.

His wife.

16. La Luna

I own nothing.

This chapter contains violence and rape, read at your own risk.

Chapter Sixteen: La Luna

*“My fingers claw your skin; try to tear my way in,
You are the moon that breaks the night for which I have to howl,”*

Howl-Florence and the Machine

In her dream she was moving; not quite running, but everything was blurring past her, could almost feel herself in motion. Nothing made sense, it was all so fast. Upon feeling as if she had fallen into a great hole, her eyes flew open and she sat up immediately, clutching at her lurching stomach, too disoriented to register her surroundings. Her legs felt warm and tingly, as if she'd actually been running in her sleep.

What had happened?

Where am I?

Still dizzy, Hermione dragged a hand over her face and reached for the secret pocket in her gown, grasping for her wand and met nothing but silk. Her dress was gone-she had been changed into a nightdress. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end and she looked down at herself, unsure.

By who?

Panic welled up inside her and she stood up quickly, lurching off the bed, and nearly fell over as her clumsy legs failed to move as she wanted them to. The room was spinning around her, she could not concentrate. Thinking fast, she crouched on the floor pressing her hands to her temples.

Think! She urged herself. Think!

It took a moment for her mind to clear and for the dizziness to go away, but in seconds everything came rushing back, and she scrambled back up, eyes flying wildly around the room.

Someone had grabbed her before she had been able to catch up to Harry and Ron, but who? Who was it?

And where in the hell am I? Had they taken her back into Hogwarts?

She looked around the room, keeping an eye out for her wand, wherever it might be. It was beautifully decorated. There was a large fireplace before the bed, and an enormous armoire along with a chaise and the floor was covered in a pristine white fluffy carpet. The walls were bare, but they were a beautiful shade of forest green. Something felt wrong, though. Gooseflesh rippled down her skin, the heavy pounding of her heart would not give her rest.

The second she caught sight of the door she ran towards it on unsteady legs and tried the crystal doorknob, but it would not budge, and her heart dropped down to her toes. Briefly she considered calling through the door but decided against it in the end. Who knew what was on the other side? Or whom, for that matter? This definitely was not Hogwarts.

Slowly she stood and turned to face what was behind her, and her knees almost gave out from underneath her once she saw what faced her.

An enormous stained glass window; an exact replica of the one at her little nook in Hogwarts, so large that it took up most of the space on the wall directly across from her. In that moment the sudden certainty of whom had captured her slammed into her and her vision swam with the shock of it. The urge to cover her eyes with her hands was overwhelming. They jerked up to her mouth but she let them go no farther.

How...?

It was an exact copy; it even had the cushioned window seat at its base, only this one was larger and made of a velvety black material. The shock was so terrible she nearly swooned, but she fought her body's instinct and approached it cautiously.

What does this mean? she thought.

Trembling from head to foot, her eyes were wild and glassy with tears but she could not give in. Pressing a hand to her mouth, Hermione backed away. *I've got to focus if I want to get out of here.*

Hermione looked back at the rest of the room with tensed shoulders. The air had grown too still, it was too quiet and all this was wreaking more havoc on her nerves. Where was he? Obviously she did not want him to be in there with her, but it would have helped to know where he was. Was he still here, wherever and whatever this place was? How long had he been gone? When would he be back?

Her heart was pounding hard; she could practically feel her own pulse in her ears.

Think, think, think. I've got to think. Merlin knows how much time I have left.

Warily, she approached the window, scanning her mind and senses. She could feel no traces of magic around it, but just to make sure she closed the distance between herself and the coloured glass and pressed her hand against its smooth surface, concentrating.

Upon feeling nothing at all other than the coolness of the glass against her damp palm Hermione went weak with excitement. As far as she could tell there was no enchantment on the window to prevent her from escaping. Adrenaline surged through her and she rushed towards the bed. Shaking, she stripped the bed of its luxurious sheets and wrapped them around the chair beside the bed and ran back to the window, lugging the chair along. There was no time for hesitation-she lifted the chair and swung it through the air, smashing it against the coloured glass with all her strength.

The glass cracked deeply, but did not break. The chair was sturdy enough that it only made a loud creaking sound. She took a deep breath. Three more times did she bring the covered chair to the window, and at last, it broke. The shattering of the glass was muffled by the sheets, and she winced as the glass rained down on her skin and hair, pricking and slashing at her. There was glass caught in her hair-she had to shake her head fiercely to get as many bits of glass as she could out, and collapsed with relief on the window seat, not caring that the jagged shards still stuck to the frame were tearing at her flesh.

Her arms ached, her mind was fried, but she had to keep going. She did not want to think about what lay in wait for her if she stayed a moment longer.

Fear and adrenaline surged up inside her again within a matter of seconds, and without a second thought she scuttled through and dropped herself off the outside ledge.

The fall was not gentle-the room was on the third floor, and though she had fallen into some shrubbery, she had sprained her ankle and she was certain her arm was broken. A scream of pain rushed up to her mouth but she grit her teeth and swallowed her shouts of agony so she would not be heard. Forcing herself to take deep, calming breaths, she inspected herself for further damage as she rose from the debris. Her body radiated with pain, several bloody cuts adorned her legs and arms; she knew it was only a matter of time before a patchwork of bruises would rise under her skin.

Grass under her feet, the smell of fresh greenery-she was in a garden. Hermione looked ahead, and saw land that continued for miles. There was a forest up ahead, and who knew what lay beyond that?

If she was lucky, a village. *Someplace I might get help.*

An idea struck her, and she tried to turn on her heel to Apparate. The pain in her left leg stopped her from moving much farther and she gasped loudly, clutching her sprained ankle. It burned and throbbed, she could actually see it begin to swell. Gritting her teeth, she tried again, but nothing happened and she ran a hand through her hair in distress. The movement made her arm flare up again but Hermione shoved the awareness of the pain to the back of her mind and began to run, fighting the tears of panic that welled in her eyes, distorting her vision.

I can't Apparate. That means there's wards all around here. I don't even have my wand!

Wherever she was, it was definitely nowhere near Hogwarts. There was no snow, it was still fresh and green here and there was dew on the grass. There was a sharp chill in the air, however-one that suggested the cold might not be far off.

She was a bit of a distance away from where she had come from-she did not dare even look back, simply trained her eyes ahead of her and kept running despite the pain in her limbs that compelled her to stop.

The roar of pure fury that erupted from well behind her was what made her pause. Even as her mind screamed at her body *to keep moving, to please don't look back just go go keep running!* she looked back anyway.

It was him there at the window, looking down at her with nothing but fury and rage on his face and just the look in his eyes made her mind go blank with fear, her blood turn to ice. Her

heart was beating like she'd been sprinting for miles. Just as he began to jump out of the window, her mind snapped back to her and she gained control of her body again, and swallowing her hysteric whimper, she sprinted off again.

She ached with pain, and longed to just stop and rest, her entire body hurt like hell, but she would not stop.

It's all in your mind, she told herself determinedly. *The more you think about it, the more it will hurt.*

There was an odd crashing noise behind her that nearly made her jump out of her skin. For a second, she entertained the thought of looking back; just to make sure she was far away enough so he would not catch her.

She was running through the forest now, trodding on branches and damp leaves and she had splashed through a stream a mere second ago. Her feet hurt, her ankle threatened to give out under her with every step, and her broken arm was sending waves of agony up to her shoulder. She had to hold it with her other arm as she ran so as not to jostle it with her movements, but for all her precaution it still hurt quite badly.

I wish I had my wand, she thought hysterically as she ran, propelling herself forward as fast as she could though both her legs and her lungs screamed in protest.

She could hear him more clearly now. He had gained upon her; his footsteps were loud and terrifying as he crashed through the brush surrounding them. If she had been a child listening to these sounds she'd have thought them to be made by a giant. She wondered why he hadn't stopped her with magic by now. She wasn't complaining, though. If he had used magic, she would be done for. But this was very telling about the sort of person he was—he could have ended it any time with a wave of his hand but here he was coming after her like a wolf, like he *enjoyed* it.

He was getting closer.

No no no no nononononono, she pleaded silently. *Please Merlin, please don't let him catch me, please please please don't*

She zigzagged past trees and attempted to leap over a fallen branch, only to end up stumbling and nearly falling flat on her face, but she caught herself in time and ran on, faster than before.

Hermione had never been one for sports, and though over the years with Harry and Ron (she ignored the intense ache in her heart at the mention of their names), with everything they had gone through, she had done her fair share of running for her life, and yet she had never run as fast as this.

Her nose was running and she was hardly able to breathe, there was a horrid ragged sound coming from her throat, her hair stuck to her sweaty skin, her heart pounded and her lungs were near to bursting but she did not, could not stop. She would rather die in this manner than by his hand.

Panting, she hurtled into a field of lavender, not caring what direction she was going in as long as she was getting farther away from him. The bright purple of the surrounding lavender caught her off guard and she stumbled for a second before she sprang into action again. By

now she was wheezing for breath, her leg muscles felt like they had been shredded to ribbons, but she carried on.

The fact that she could not hear him anymore hit her, and she chanced a look behind her only to trip over her own feet when she found him to be only a few feet away.

She caught herself in time, but that second when she stumbled was all he needed to close the gap between them and bring her to the ground, flattening a section of the lavender with their bodies.

No, she tried to shout, but he had knocked whatever air she had just regained out of her so she could only open her mouth in terror as she fell on her back, with him landing right on top of her rather roughly so that the last of the air in her lungs was knocked out and stars danced before her eyes where there should have been none.

Uncomprehending, she dazedly flailed and struck at him with her good arm and kicked him anywhere she could reach. He deflected her blows from his face but her nails scraped at his neck and he hissed.

Cold, pale hands lashed out and gripped both her wrists, pulling both her arms above her head. The agony from the pain in her broken arm was too much; she writhed and emptied her lungs desperately as he dug his fingers into her flesh. Her legs were pinned to the ground underneath him as he straddled her, and yet she still struggled to escape, not wanting to accept the fact that she had lost.

“No!” she cried, for she had finally found her voice. **“NO!”**

Almost blind with rage, he struck her across the face. Then again. One more time after she tried to scream again.

There was blood trickling from her nose and there was a split in her lip; her eyes were glassy and slightly unfocused when they found him again. She blinked slowly, tried backing away on her hands and feet, struggling to breath normally.

Malfoy sat on her hips and leaned down to smile mockingly at her and she winced. His pupils were blown so wide she could hardly see his irises, his lips were pulled back so she could see his gleaming, predatory smile.

“Don’t you dare ever try to run away again.” Each word was enunciated slowly, clearly. Like he wanted to engrave it into her memory.

“Don’t you dare tell me what to do!” she hissed. *“I am not yours!”*

He laughed. “Are you so sure, my love? Have you seen your hand?”

Her quizzical look prompted him to free her right hand and show her the ring on her finger, the same one he had forced on her months ago. The smirk on his face grew more smug as she stared at it in horror, mouth gaping open. Like a most devout man taking in the words of a holy scripture his eyes took in every expression that crossed her face.

“When?” she asked.

“The moment you came to me,” he said softly. “Filch was spying for me, he caught you leaving the castle (that was very unwise, my love,) and followed you until you were out of

Hogwarts anti apparition wards and brought you here to me with the help of a Portkey I sent him. I had you cleaned and dressed and took the liberty of giving you your ring.”

“It’s only a stupid ring. That doesn’t make me yours, not when I did not consent!”

“Only a ring?” he chuckled, shaking his head. “In addition to the enchantments I put on it last year, I added a few new ones. Some are ancient, some of my creation. Simply put, *we are married*. You are my wife, I am your husband.”

The words were barely processing in her head. Malfoy touched her cheek reverently.

“I have to make sure my little bird won’t fly away,” he murmured. Hermione looked revolted. His hand went up to smooth her wild hair.

“I missed you,” he said softly. Let his head hang down to her neck, let his lips graze against the hollow of her throat. ‘You can’t know how many times I’ve almost gone to tear that blasted castle apart to get you.’ He pressed a kiss to her skin, his forehead connected with her chin—she sucked in a breath. “You’ve been away from me for far too long, but I suppose that hardly matters now I’ve got you here.” He pulled back, looked into her eyes.

For the very first time in their acquaintance, she regarded him with pure, unadulterated fear.

“You are insane,” she choked out. “How *dare* you force me to marry you against my will? First kidnap me and then force me into marriage?!”

He said nothing as he watched her vent.

“I watched you and Longbottom at the Masquerade ball,” he said quietly. “You two are certainly close.” He spat the last word out with scorn, and she flinched at the venom in his tone.

“It’s *certainly* none of your business,” she hissed. “Let me go and get this bloody ring off me.”

“Did you fuck him like you fucked Potter?” he asked suddenly, gripping her wrists tighter so that she cried out in pain. “Behind Potter’s back or as he watched?”

“I never—”

“DON’T LIE TO ME!” he shouted, and the tears she had been so fiercely fighting back began to leak from her eyes.

“I saw you with him. You were practically all over each other. Was Potter not enough for you?” Avoiding meeting his frightening eyes, she shrank back, pressing herself into the cool earth in fear.

“Please,” she whispered. “Malfoy, let me go. You’re not acting rational—”

Her head snapped back with the force of the blow he gave her. A yelp of pain escaped her and her eyes rolled back into her head; the split in her lip burst open by the blow and began to bleed.

He gripped her jaw, squeezing her cheeks so that her lips puckered and she turned her large, cautious eyes onto his.

"I own you," he said softly. "The ring on your finger and the Malfoy crest on your arm prove it. You are my wife and I can do what I wish to you."

"Nobody owns me," she retorted fiercely.

His expression darkened considerably, and he looked like he might slap her again. Hermione flinched and pressed herself into the earth more deeply, breathing erratically as her arms pulled at her magical restraints. She moaned from the pain in her arm and suddenly he was there, nuzzling along her neck, trailing down to her breasts.

"No..." she said, but his hand covered her mouth and he drew back suddenly.

"Why did you leave the castle?" he asked, pulling his hand away. "And why weren't your friends with you?"

He saw how she flinched, how her lips pressed together as though she was suppressing a sob. She kept silent, however, refusing to answer his query.

"Why did you leave?" he growled again, gripping her jaw more tightly and she whimpered.

Still no answer.

Hermione knew what was coming, she could sense it. So she braced her mind and tried as hard as she could to think of something else and to push the memories of what had happened what seemed like so long ago to the way back of her mind. Without preamble, he entered her mind, pushing to get to what he wanted but her resistance still held though it had been greatly weakened. He tried again, but she held tightly, much to his frustration. He cleared his mind once more and fixed his eyes on hers though she tried to avert them, finally breaking down the wall she had built, and she cried out beneath him as he invaded her mind.

Everything that had happened that night played in his mind; the dances with Neville, Ginny, Luna, Harry and Ron, and what had happened after.

She screamed as he began to tear at her nightgown, raking his teeth over her neck.

"No! Stop!" she thrashed around underneath him to get away as he tore the remnants of her dress away, revealing her undergarments, which he tore off just as forcefully before stripping himself of his own clothes.

Fully nude, his porcelain skin shone in the moonlight as he stood above her. He had a magnificent body, lean and well muscled and toned, as beautiful as the rest of him. All she saw was his eyes. They shone black like obsidian in the shadows.

"You let him touch you?!" he hissed angrily. "You let that fool touch you after I claimed you?"

He was yelling at this point, and she was too weak to reply, not to mention he was now gripping her throat quite tightly between his hands. But she couldn't let him think she belonged to him. Anger rose inside her and she grit her teeth and mouthed, 'not yours,' at him even as he squeezed her throat more tightly, squeezing her windpipe.

"Oh, but you are, *ma petit oiseau*," he snarled, groaning as he ground his erection against her core. "And I'm going to prove it to you."

She let out a pained scream; he was now holding her injured ankle and pulling her towards him, her arm flared in pain and she felt like she would rather endure a thousand rounds with the Cruciatus Curse than what was about to happen.

Though she had already shed many tears before then, they returned full force when he crawled back on top of her; she could feel his eyes raking over her body. When she tried turning her head away again he turned her back to face him; her arms were falling numb.

“I’ve wanted you for so long,” he admitted huskily, kissing her jaw. A deep blush formed and spread over her skin as he gazed at her hungrily. There was nothing she could do but look down to avoid the horrible look in his eyes.

She was exquisite. Absolutely perfect.

So akin to the paintings of goddesses he had seen on his trips to Paris and Italy, full figured, wide hips and luscious breasts, wonderfully shaped legs and that shapely waist he knew so well; though she tried to cover her nether region by bringing her knees up he could still see the pink flesh there, and he felt a dizzying rush of heat sweep through him. She was so lovely and bright it almost hurt him to look at her, his eyes felt branded like he was looking directly at the sun but he refused to look away from her.

Tears glistened on her skin-her pale, impossibly soft skin and he brushed them away with his fingers even as she attempted to wrench herself away from him, kicking him wherever she could reach but he pushed himself between her thighs and widened them further with his hands so that he could better fit. When his hips pressed against her she squeezed her eyes shut but his hand on the side of her breast made them fly open again and she stared at him with wide, humiliated eyes.

“Please don’t do this,” she whispered as he nuzzled his nose against her neck. “Please don’t. *Please.*”

At last, he bent down and kissed her hard and she moaned with pain. Her tears smeared on his cheeks and when he pulled away she tried to scream for help but he crushed his lips to hers again, palming her breasts in his hands.

“Scream all you want, my pet. There’s no one for miles around, and if there were, the enchantments around this place prevents them from hearing or finding us,” he spoke into her lips as he tweaked and pulled at her nipples. ‘And you could have run as fast as you could to get away, but the wards never would have let you off my land,’ he added. “So keep that in mind if you think about running away again.” Her body jerked when he pressed a kiss to her nipple, and then squeezed it lightly. “There’s nowhere for you to go, little bird.” His little bird cried out in anguish underneath him; he could feel her shaking so he kissed her more softly this time though her mouth was sad and unresponsive.

The way he was settled over her, his cock was pressing lengthwise against her folds, and he let out a hoarse moan as she wriggled around in an effort to escape, accidentally rubbing her heat against him though she’d meant to pull away. His hands trembled lightly, his breathing was out of sorts and he brought his hand down to trace over her folds and she jerked again, letting out a shaky sob that inflamed his desire.

The feel of his skin on hers made her shudder in disgust, his erection was digging into her flesh and she felt faint with feeling what was pressed against her vulva. It felt hot and it was pulsing and it made her feel sick. It frightened her immensely and she renewed her struggles, anxious to get away. This could not happen. She had gone through too much to end up here. He didn't deserve to get his way.

His hand was still on her, pulling at her, exploring her and she shut her eyes tight. Her head was swimming.

"Please let me go, Malfoy."

"How many times did you do it with Potter?" he asked. His fingers caressed her clit-she tried moving her hips away but he pressed himself against her so that she couldn't move any farther and Hermione let out a frustrated cry.

"I didn't!" she snarled as he bit down on her breast, hard, and she screamed.

"Liar," he hissed, before he began to attack her neck.

Tears trailed down her face as he sucked and licked and bit down on her skin, below her ear, on her jaw, collarbone, everywhere. Try as she might she could not quell the flurry of frightened whimpers that tumbled from her lips.

"Please stop, *please*," she begged, turning her head to the side when he tried to kiss her again.

"Don't you dare deny me what you gave so freely to others," he growled. He muttered a spell Hermione wasn't familiar with, but she found out its purpose when she felt the lukewarm substance coating her insides and she tried bringing her legs up to shield herself somehow, anyhow but he quickly wrenched them back down despite her cry of protest and fastened them to the ground with magic.

At that moment Hermione looked up at the moon, not wanting to accept what was about to happen. Tears stung her eyes but she was startled to find it was nighttime. So caught up she had been in trying to get away, it had never really registered in her mind what time of day it was. She thought of Harry and Ron and remembered how she had hit her head on that rock when Filch had tackled her, and wondered if all this was actually a dream brought on by some head injury she might have sustained.

He was kissing her now, as he lined himself up to her entrance, nipping and sucking at her plump lips, which were salty from her copious tears. His cock was prodding into her and she could taste blood on her tongue where she had bit through her lip.

"You're bloody perfect," he hissed, and she sobbed loudly as he ran his hands down her curves.

Both their bodies shone in the light of the moon, his muscles rippled as he positioned himself over her, devouring her sad lips with an insatiable lust that radiated from his pores.

"Don't cry, little bird, if you relax it won't hurt as much," he murmured into her lips. With a trembling hand he guided himself into her, pushing past her unwilling flesh little by little.

"Please, no!" she cried just before he plunged inside her with incredible force, right up to the hilt.

Her keening cry of pain echoed around them in the empty field, and did not stop as he ruthlessly pistoned himself into her, in and out of her unwilling body.

It felt like he was tearing her in half, it hurt so much-she felt him stretching her body to the point of pain, again and again and *oh Merlin how it hurt*. He claimed her lips then, and swallowed her screams as he stabbed away at her innocence.

Draco moaned in ecstasy, pumping his hips forward. Her walls clung to his cock as he thrust in and out and he was almost blinded by the pleasure that overtook him. Digging his fingers into her flesh, he gripped her hips and brought her body forward to meet his thrusts.

"You're mine now," he taunted in her ear, licking its shell as he lifted her legs up to his shoulders. She couldn't even hear him through her pain as she writhed and sobbed beneath him. "And you'll never touch Potter or Longbottom so long as I live," he vowed as he gave a particularly vicious thrust that left her gasping for breath.

One, two, three more strokes and he came inside her, letting out a hoarse cry of pleasure as he released his load into her battered insides, shuddering like he was fighting off the deepest pain. Her lower body burned and stung, she tried maneuvering to get him off her and failed. Hermione closed her eyes and pretended it wasn't happening.

A choked sound emanated from her throat-a restrained scream-it flared hot inside her, she felt it pull down at the corners of her lips and she clung desperately to the hope of one day paying retribution.

As if he'd guessed her thoughts he laid his finger on her lips and kissed her hungrily before saying, "I had my house-elf give you a Contraceptive Potion while you were under, my love. There's no need for worry."

Those words were a small relief. Hermione clenched her hands as best as she was able-she was so drained, it was hard to focus now. She felt as if she were made of wood. Her mind had gone sluggish with shock.

Malfoy stared down at the blood coating his cock then up at this bride who was fighting to stay conscious, ever wary of him. Her eyes focused and unfocused again, and when he caught her eye she glanced down, the pinpricks of her pupils almost hidden in the dark brown of her eyes. The sight that met her there drained all the blood from her face, which then crumpled as she took in the evidence of her rape.

Draco saw the truth in her eyes as she turned her head away in shame. So he'd been wrong after all. A vicious sense of triumph flowed through him-she was fully his. All he could hear was the pounding of his heart, his uneven breathing.

All mine, praise Merlin. And now that I've got my little bird I'll never let her go.

She felt his still hardened cock on her inner thigh and she tried to wriggle out of his grasp, her face contorting with pain.

"Stop," she murmured, her voice hoarse and barely above a whisper. "Just kill me."

But he was past listening; he held her hips and resumed the assault feverishly, to her horror and rage. The tortured cries of the witch fell on ears that resisted hearing them, and floated

upwards in supplication to the darkened skies like fragments of a lost prayer as the night wore arduously long.

17. Too Much

Chapter Seventeen: Too Much

*“You’ve got to spend some time, love,
You’ve got to spend some time, with me,
And I know that you’ll find, love
I will possess your heart.”*
I Will Possess Your Heart— Death Cab for Cutie

When he awoke there was a sensation of such buoyancy in him that it manifested itself in a huge grin on his face—a true grin that spread from ear to ear, and slightly bewildered, chuckled softly to himself. Sitting up in the bed he stretched languidly, ignoring the various pains flaring up across his body as he flexed his arms and yawned widely before looking down at the witch by his side.

Those long dark brown curls were everywhere; splayed over their pillows and tangled around her arms, several thick strands lay across her face, shielding her eyes of the sight of him. Gently, he brushed the hair away from her face, trailing his fingertips over her cheeks with the gentlest of touches. He exhaled sharply upon catching sight of the bruises that littered her face. Purple and blue stretched across her cheekbones, she had bitten clear through her bottom lip, there were trails of dried blood going down from her lips to her chin, and the skin on her face appeared to be tight and shiny due to the dried tears that had stuck strands of hair to her cheeks. He had been much too rough with her—the evidence was staring him in the eyes, and he felt a surge of shame rush over him. Granted, he’d always been rough when bedding a witch but this was beyond that. He had only just gotten her, and might have killed her on their first night! That would not do.

I got too carried away.

Cupping her face in his palms, he muttered a healing spell and watched as the bruises faded slowly from underneath her skin. It took a more advanced healing spell to tend to her cut lip. As he stroked her cheeks softly, he resolved to control his temper from then on. She was his wife, his ultimate treasure, and he felt angry with himself for having beat her in this manner. He caressed her face, trying to smooth the crease between her brows. Still asleep, she shifted ever so slightly and he watched, fascinated. Somehow the sheets had been pulled away from her and her top half was exposed—he watched her nipples stiffen from the cold morning air. Draco admired them for a moment and placed a hand on the side of her breast. His thumb brushed against her nipple and he felt desire stir inside him once more.

That small touch sent the blood rushing down to his groin and he groaned hoarsely. Judging by the number of times he had fucked her the previous night, he was surprised he

was still randy. He had been so furious upon learning that that bastard Potter had stolen a taste of what was his; and had fucked her with all the rage and lust he had been holding in for so long.

Ever since the Masquerade ball at Hogwarts, he had been under the impression that one of Hermione's three dunces had taken her virginity, but he had been wrong. Of course, Potter had tried; he had seen that when he had forced his way into her memories, but he had quickly forgotten after seeing what had happened after. And so, when he had pulled out the first time, he had been surprised to find that she had been a virgin after all. After the initial shock had worn off, he had hardened considerably and the elation and pride coursed through him.

Fueled by rage and lust, he'd rushed to have her at last; her pleas and cries of pain only made him harder and made his thrusts rougher. He knew he was hurting her, but he would never have dreamed of stopping, and several times, found he *could not* stop, even if he had wished to. He had wanted her for so long and now that he had her, he would never let her go. She was stunningly perfect; her body fit into his just right, the way she felt wrapped around his cock, so hot, so sweet, sent his eyeballs rolling upwards with pure pleasure as he moved in and out of her. Later on she had succumbed to the pain and fell into unconsciousness, lying limp on the cold grass. Once he had finished, he had carried his battered bride to his bed, which he hastily remade with a slash of his wand, and laid her down gently, as though she was made of glass.

There was something he needed to do before he went to bed. Two things, actually. He approached the ruined window, and with a few spells he had restored it to its original state, and had added several enchantments to prevent it from being broken again.

He had known he had forgotten something important earlier, and this had been it. So eager he had been to see her, he had forgotten to ward it so she would not attempt to escape. And attempt she did though he had meant what he had said. There were strong wards around his land; no one could get through or even leave without his permission. No one would find them here.

Once that was done with he strode back over to where she was, face still contorted with pain. Before going to sleep the night before he'd noticed her arm was broken, and quickly set about to healing it while she was still out, and then did the same for her ankle. Once the swelling had gone down and the bones had been mended, he pressed the back of his hand to her forehead to gauge her temperature. Nothing out of the ordinary-no doubt she would awaken soon, she was already beginning to stir.

Now that his wife was healed and out of danger he could relax. Draco took a step back and admired his handiwork from the night before. He couldn't help the fierce satisfaction he felt upon seeing he had claimed her at last.

There was blood smeared all along her inner thighs, still trickling down from her abused sex and seeping into the linen. Bruises in the shapes of his hands wrapped around her wrists and hips and all around her body; angry red scratch marks marred her beautiful creamy skin, the restraints on her wrists had chafed them, leaving them raw and bloody. A purpled ring of fingerprints adorned her throat like a cursed necklace. His semen coated her thighs and seeped out of her lower lips, and he was immediately hard as a rock again, just looking at her.

She was finally his. The marriage had been consummated and now nothing could take her away from him.

Nothing.

Movement drew his attention upwards-her eyes were fluttering open and closed-she was wakening. A distressed groan left her open mouth, and she grimaced as she brought a hand to her forehead. Draco watched as she paused, wide-eyed, and sensed when the pain and the memories slammed back into her.

A harsh exhalation of breath broke the silence, and she whimpered as she caught sight of the remnants of their doomed honeymoon.

As he watched, she shut her eyes tight and waited exactly ten seconds before opening them again, but the scene remained unchanged. Sad eyes brimmed with tears, and then she noticed him at last.

"You..." she whispered hoarsely, terrified. Draco remembered her screams from mere hours ago, and she did too. Her hand clutched at her throat, and brought attention to her naked chest. Automatically she clenched the sheet in her fists and raised it to shield herself from his damning eyes.

"S-stay back," she ordered through croaking whispers, but he did not listen.

He crawled onto the bed, reaching for her, and at once, she let out a high, panicked mewling sound, and with obvious effort she wrenched herself up and to the far corner of the bed and stared at him through wild bloodshot eyes. Her pupils had shrunk to the size of a pin head. His hand trailed up and he caught her ankle, even as she tried to pull her leg back to herself.

Draco roughly yanked her leg towards himself, and she hissed with pain, her eyes rolling back. He supposed she must have torn some tissue or pulled a muscle. Later he would have Bogg tend to her more thoroughly.

"No!" she rasped. "*Don't-don't touch me!*"

Draco was startled to see tears leaking out of her eyes; she had cried so much already, he had thought she would have no more tears to shed at this point. Clearly, he had been wrong.

Though she continued to plead for him to let her go, he ignored her requests and settled himself over her, his painful erection rubbing against her vulva, which still burned and bled from the pain of the last attack. As soon as she felt his penis on her, she recoiled and the tears worsened, she shook her head and sobbed loudly, thrashing around as best as she was able to get free. His hand on her cheek caused her to shrink back, but he grabbed her chin and held her in place.

"Look at me."

Her eyes remained screwed shut.

"*Look. At. Me.*"

Draco squeezed her chin between his fingers and she gasped, her lips parting ever so slightly as her eyes flew open.

Her eyes shone with tears, her long lashes were dark and spiky. He stared into her eyes; lost in their loveliness; the fear, the pain, the anger. Never had he encountered eyes as expressive as hers and he stared deep into them, entranced with their depth.

"Let me go," she whispered, her voice breaking. "You got what you wanted, now let me go."

He leaned in until their lips barely touched before he whispered, "I didn't just want the sex, Granger, though I am enjoying it immensely. I want *you*. Now get it into that clever head of yours," he tapped her forehead, "that I am *never* going to let you go."

He pressed his lips to hers and she let out a wail as he pushed into her opening and began to thrust rapidly, already almost at his climax.

"STOP!" Hermione cried out into his lips as he slammed into her, rocking the entire bed with the force of his thrusts. She beat at him with her fists, not even caring that he had healed her arm, pounding on his back and raking her nails against his skin, wherever she could reach. He hissed with pleasure as she frantically clawed at his back, and let out a hoarse moan as he came inside her, slowing to a grind to draw out his release.

Breathing hard, he drew back and kissed her soundly on the lips. Exhausted and shocked, she didn't move or fight. Her eyes were pained, lips clamped shut and she was breathing shallowly as he watched her.

"Wake up," he murmured, toying with a lock of her hair. She looked at him blankly.

Moving slowly so he wouldn't startle her further, he gathered her in his arms. Hermione could not resist, she was too weak and between her legs ached with a pain so intense she thought she would die from it. He held her to him and she cried silently, covering her face with her palms as her body trembled.

"Let me go. Please, Malfoy." She was speaking just above a whisper, but he heard her quite clearly. "I won't tell anyone-I promise."

Here she was abruptly silenced. He pushed her off his lap-not roughly—and walked to the far side of the room, just in front of the repaired window. She stared after him curiously, hopefully, wondering if perhaps her wish would be granted.

"Come."

She hesitated, still on the bed. She wasn't quite sure if she could walk; her entire body was throbbing in pain.

"I won't ask again." His voice chilled her, raising gooseflesh on her skin.

Slowly, carefully, she slid off the large bed to stand at its side. Suddenly aware of her nakedness, she brought her hands up to cover her breasts, wincing as her fingers brushed against all the bite marks he had left on them. As she stood, however, some of her long hair swung to her front, so at least she was partially covered, so she quickly lowered her hands to cover her lower area. Her leg and thigh muscles ached something terrible, though, they felt like jelly so that she swayed where she stood, and she was afraid she would fall any second. But at least she was standing. So far so good. She took a step—

and landed on the floor, biting her lips to keep from screaming in pain.

He was still standing before the window, those wicked grey eyes trained on her as he stayed absolutely still. He said nothing, but it was clear he would not help her.

I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, she chanted in her mind, gritting her teeth as she tried to stand again. Her fists clenched with the pain, her fingernails dug into her palms. The area between her legs was positively on fire; she felt raw-as though there were shards of glass embedded into the walls of her private flesh, tearing at each other as she moved. Fresh blood and hot cum trickled thickly down her legs, she stared at it in horror.

Hermione Granger was not a bad girl. She had good morals, had always striven to follow the rules and make as few mistakes as possible, but if there was one thing she was certain about in that moment it was that if she had her wand, or hell, even a gun, a knife, *anything*, she was sure she would have killed him without any hesitation.

Now on both feet, she moved as best as she could so as to not inflict more pain upon herself, which was virtually impossible.

All it took was one step and then another, and another, and it was like he was inside her again, forcing himself into her repeatedly, tearing her flesh. All Hermione wanted to do at that moment was to give in to her protesting muscles and let herself fall to the ground but she would not let her screams escape the confines of her throat, for she knew it would only give him pleasure.

She fell two more times-by the last tumble she felt light-headed and didn't think she would ever be able to walk again, and had been sorely tempted to let herself lie there until she died. Her throat burned from the grunts of pain she held back. His cum clung to her legs as it dried, she found herself wishing she could set herself on fire to get rid of any trace of himself he had left on her.

At last she reached him. Her cheeks were aflame, he had been watching her intently from the beginning of her plight, and she had caught him looking at the marks on her body. He seemed almost proud of himself, though he was not smiling, she could just feel the smugness radiating from him. He himself had a few bleeding scratches and bruises from her struggles, and she was horrified and intensely embarrassed to see her own blood smeared along his thighs and groin. Otherwise, he was relatively unscathed, and she hated him for it.

At that moment, she was filled with a hatred unlike any she had ever felt before. It raced through her veins and clouded her mind, and her body tightened with it, shaking uncontrollably. She wanted to hurt him, just as much as he had hurt her and beyond, so that he would scream as much as she had screamed that night, so that his body would feel as though it held daggers underneath his skin, so that he would cry for mercy just as she had.

Hermione trembled under his gaze-both rage and fear warred within her. She couldn't help it. More than anything she wanted herself to be strong, to not reveal how utterly defeated and torn she felt, figuratively and literally. Here they were, naked in each other's presence, after he had raped her for what felt like hours on end, her body horribly battered and yet aside from her blood on his privates, he looked fine. Like there was nothing wrong. Like he wasn't the piece of dung he really was. His stupid eyes practically sparkled with victory, and his whole body was relaxed, because he knew she could not fight back. He had won.

No.

She raised her fists and let out a strangled yell as she rushed to close the margin of space left in between them. Her fingers were curled like claws and she found herself anxious to see his blood on them, to feel his heart beat fading underneath her hands. Her legs ached immensely, but the sweet thought of causing him harm shoved the pain to the back of her mind as she prepared to do just that.

Somehow, amazingly, her fists paused within an inch of striking at his chest and not by her own volition. She tried again and the same thing happened. He watched her, smirking as she tried again and again to strike at his chest or grab his neck or take a swing at his face, and yet not a single blow was delivered.

Her breathing was ragged once again, desperation grew inside of her as she finally halted her attempted assault, panting.

“What—”

Malfoy reached out and brought her hands to his chest, placing her palms flat on his skin. She made to jerk away but he wouldn’t let her.

“Have you forgotten?” he asked quietly. “The ring still has the same enchantments as before. As long as you wear it, you cannot harm me.”

Her eyes widened as she stared past his chest, her hands slackening and sliding a little ways down his chest. He bit back a moan at the sensation and waited as she looked back up at him. Her brown eyes practically blazed with hatred, and he found he was a little intimidated by the ferocity in her glare.

“You son of a banshee!” she hissed so sharply it almost hurt his ears. “After all you’ve done you won’t even let me fight back?! What am I, some sort of mindless slave?! You’ve ruined everything!”

“Is it because you’re afraid of me?” she continued quickly, her eyes shining with a strange light. ‘You’re restraining me like this because you’re afraid that I’m more clever than you realize, isn’t it? You know I could beat you.’ she gave a strange laugh. “I always have.”

He said nothing.

She subdued then, and looked at him. He felt her eyes searching him for something, and he stared back calmly.

“Is this why you’ve done all this?” she asked. “To get back at me?”

“It was, in the beginning,” he admitted softly. “I hated you so much, because you were no better than vermin and yet everything you did drew me in. You were so far beneath me and yet you are one of the most powerful witches in my acquaintance, you are everything I could have hoped for in my future wife, which you are now.”

She took a step back, shaking her head, but he would have none of it. Draco yanked her sharply back to himself, gripping her arms.

“Oh no, sweetheart,” he snarled, “You wanted the truth and here it is, so you might as well listen.” She struggled against his hold still, but he kept speaking, because he knew she was listening.

“Every time,” he growled, snaking his hand up to her hair and grabbing a fistful of her curls. She gasped as he drew her head back sharply to look into her eyes. Her lips quivered but she said nothing, staring up at him in fear.

“Every time you bested me in any class, whenever you rattled off another answer to a question, all I could think about was grabbing you by the hair and fucking you *hard* over your desk. I watched you every day, my love. I couldn’t get enough of you.” His chuckle rumbled low in his chest and she shivered as she felt it. “You cast your spell on me, little witch. And soon after all I could think about was making you mine.”

“I am not a possession!” she hissed. “I am *not* an object, waiting to be claimed! You can’t do this!”

His finger on her lips silenced her and she jerked away.

“Protest for as long as you want but our marriage is consummated,” he murmured. “You *are* mine.”

She made an exasperated sound, and shook her head wildly in all her distress. Her throat burned from all the screaming she’d done the night before and the screaming she’d done moments prior.

“Don’t agitate yourself, pet. This ought to be a happy time for you,” he said calmly, rubbing her arms.

She stumbled back from his embrace and he let her, watching as she fell to the ground, having forgot her physical state. Struggling for breath, she scooted herself backwards until she bumped into the side of the bed.

She was looking at him as though he was some sort of wild beast. He frowned.

All the whispers, the countless sighs and wistful remarks she had ever heard at Hogwarts echoed through her mind. How many times had she suffered through a class or lunch break, forced to listen to the other girls around her chatter on about how beautiful Draco Malfoy was as he swaggered through the hall or sent them disdainful looks from the other side of the classroom? Even she had had to admit to herself long ago that he was very handsome, but she’d never, ever joined in with the longing sighs, because she’d been lucky enough to know what he was really like. To think, what she’d thought she’d known about him then was barely a glimpse into a chaotically woven tapestry that was fringed and burnt on all edges.

Now as he stood there in front of the window, the steadily strengthening light of the morning sun set his fair hair aglow and shined along his porcelain skin, she could not deny that he was beautiful. If it wasn’t for all that he had done to her, she would have thought him to look an angel. But it didn’t matter how beautiful he was. What he had done (*and what would he do in the future?* she thought) was unforgivable.

He should have red eyes and pointed teeth, scarred skin and three toed feet and sickly green scales, she thought angrily to herself. *He doesn’t deserve to look so beautiful. He is a*

monster; a demon.

She thought to her classmates back in Hogwarts. Would they still blush and sigh over him if they knew what he'd done to her, what he was capable of? That he had no remorse?

She didn't dare look into his eyes, for she was sure she would break if she did. It didn't matter anyway. He approached her, even as she dragged herself away on her elbows, modesty be damned. Once she was out in the open he began to circle her, and she stopped, having nowhere else to go. Though she tried not to let it show her body shook badly, and she knew he had noticed.

"I already told you I would never let you go," he said calmly. "So it's no use begging for it."

Her body sagged with grief, but at the same time, her temper flared up, white-hot and lethal.

"You can't honestly kidnap me and think no one's going to come looking for me! Are you so stupid? Did you think I would just give up once you captured me? You may have married me, and you may have raped me but I will *never* give up until I am free of you."

He said nothing, staring impassively at her throughout her tirade. It was like she was talking to a concrete slab. Hermione tightened her fists, and then remembered that was useless.

"You know," he said, "It's all thanks to your love that you're mine. He left you there for me to take."

"What are you talking about?" she asked impatiently. 'He left me behind because he wanted me to be safe. None of this ever would have happened if I'd listened to him. I ignored what he said and thought I could reach them in time.' Her voice began to break, to her embarrassment. "It's my own fault I was captured, not his."

"Is that what you think?" he asked, coming forward to cup her face in his hands. Although his actions were gentle the malice in his eyes remained. "He left you, sweetheart. If he really loved you he would have known you would follow them. If he loved you he would have taken you along instead of keeping their departure a secret from you. He never would have left you vulnerable, ripe for plucking. But he did."

"Stop—" she tried to pull away. He held fast to her.

"Potter knows the things I've done," he said, leaning closer. 'Did he really think that castle could keep me out forever?' He laughed. "I've breached it twice, little bird. Don't you remember?"

Hermione said nothing. She knew his intent, and refused to let his words impact her.

"He was trying to protect me," she said firmly.

His lips brushed against hers and she squirmed. "And look where that got you."

Hermione tried to pull away and couldn't. "I won't stay here," she said, suppressing a violent shiver as he kissed his way down her neck. "I'll find a way out."

“You can try,” he said. ‘But you won’t get anywhere. Even if your little friends look for you, they won’t ever find you, that I can guarantee. This place is too well protected. I do have to keep my wife safe, don’t I?’ He laughed to himself as she flinched at the term. “Not only that, *dearest*, but I doubt you will find a way to get past me. I have taken your wand, and there is a charm inside and around this Manor that prevents you from using wandless magic of any kind. There’s a great many things you need to learn, pet. These are only a few of them. But here’s another one, while we’re at it.”

Suddenly, he was crouching down in front of her knees, gripping her thighs. Hermione gave a startled shout as he ran his fingers along and upwards the trail of blood and cum, collecting the messy substances in his palm. He ran his fingers along her sticky folds and she tried to tear herself away to no avail. He stood quickly and she quieted, watching with frightened eyes as he brought his hand up to her face. His fingers were coated thickly in the mess, and he rubbed them together as he spoke to emphasize his point.

“I own you, Granger. Your belly is full of my seed, that sweet little pussy belongs to *me*. This window,” he gestured behind them, ‘was my wedding gift to you. First of all: It’s rude to break such a gift. That took me a lot of time and effort to have constructed. Secondly: I will not have you speaking to me in such a manner. I am your husband, and you *will* show me respect. Thirdly,’ he brought his fingers up to her lips. “Open.”

She stared at him with disgust. “Are you mad? *Wedding gift*? Is that your way of trying to sway me over before you force yourself on me? And you *do not* own me!”

No sooner had she finished than he had plunged his fingers inside her mouth, holding her jaw tightly with his other hand so she would not bite him. She gagged and spluttered in shock, bringing her hands up to shove him away, only to find they had been magically bound behind her back.

“Lick them clean,” he ordered.

She stared at him in disbelief and shook her head, frowning.

He gripped her jaw more tightly, and she winced, a muffled sound of pain emitting from her mouth.

“This is me being nice, Princess,” he hissed. “Unless you want my cock instead of my fingers in that pretty little mouth, I suggest you do as I say.” His eyes flashed malevolently, and she shed tears of humiliation as she licked her own blood and his semen off his fingers, gagging at the taste. Draco shuddered as she did so, and bent forward to suck at her jaw as she finished. She didn’t need to wait for his next order, so she swallowed it quickly, shuddering as she felt it slip down her throat.

“I wasn’t trying to ‘sway you over’ with that gift, as you put it, love. I know how attached you were to that place, and figured you would like having one of your own.” He wrapped one arm around her waist, securing her to him, and pressed his hips against hers as he slowly removed his fingers from her mouth.

She turned away as he loosed his grip on her jaw, trailing his hand down to cup her neck.

“How does it feel to be the new Mrs. Malfoy?” he asked as he bent down and buried his face in the junction between her neck and her shoulder. She stayed absolutely still, quivering

with fear.

“Like I’m in a nightmare,” she whispered hoarsely. “I don’t want this-any of it. I hate you so much, Malfoy.”

He chuckled, brushing his thumb over her cheek. “You’ll get used to it soon enough. Of course, we are to visit mother and father in a week’s time.” She stiffened at the news, and looked up at him, stricken.

“What?”

“They are quite anxious to see you,” he added, watching her carefully. “As is the Dark Lord.”

That did it. This was too much to process. First Harry and Ron’s desertion, then the capture and rape, then waking up to all this?

He caught her as she slumped to the ground, unconscious. He set her down on the bed, taking care not to press on her bruises, and after settling her head on his pillow, he called for Bogg.

As Bogg tended to her, he stroked her hair, lost in his thoughts. Perhaps he should have left that last bit of news for later. She had gone through too much in so little time; he had been a fool to rush in with this news so quickly. He needed to give her time.

Mrs. Weasley tapped her foot on the ground anxiously as she waited. It was a habit of Arthur’s she had picked up over the years, one she’d detested at first and then had grown to adopt it herself, much to her displeasure. She smiled and nodded at the other magical folk, who merrily called out greetings as they passed by. Bustling about and merry faced with excitement, they were all waiting for the Hogwarts express to bring their children home for the holiday.

Knackered after a long, busy day, Mrs. Weasley sighed. Much of the past week had been spent in preparing the Burrow-cleaning, mending, washing, and cooking. Her legs ached and her arms were quite sore; she was in need of sleep and perhaps a bit of Firewhiskey, but she couldn’t have missed this. Arthur was away at work, and she had left the twins in charge of a pudding she had made just prior to leaving for the station. To everyone’s collective shock they had become somewhat more responsible since starting their own business so she knew she could trust them, but found she was still reverting to old habits, and frequently found herself praying the house would be still standing by the time she got back.

A glance at her wrist watch informed her there were still twenty minutes until the train rolled in. She began tapping her foot harder.

She had already finished making their presents, as well. Though she knew it was silly of her to continue making them those jumpers, she couldn’t help but make them, anyway. It was almost a tradition of sorts. She’d tuck herself away somewhere inside the Burrow while everyone was busy and she’d spend hours making those jumpers by hand, not magic. She prided herself on those. It was her own way of telling Harry and Hermione she considered them part of the family-her own children, even. She knew they genuinely appreciated the

gifts, especially Harry, and even though everyone else would simply shrug them on half-heartedly and the twins would crack their usual jokes, she knew they all liked them. Fred and George were already wearing theirs, of course. She had made them specially to match the bold colour scheme of their shop. Harry's was a dark blue; Ron's was that shade of brown he was particularly fond of. She hoped they would fit, the two boys seemed to grow bigger and bigger every time she saw them. Hermione and Ginny's were more detailed, with more intricate patterns and softer colours. She had already sent Bill and Charlie their own, she had even taken the time to carefully make one for Fleur; a soft wrap made of the finest, silver-coloured mohair yarn she could afford.

The train's whistle broke through her thoughts and she gave a startled little jump, looking around nervously. The Hogwarts express had already stopped and students were streaming through its doors, slipping into the surging crowd of anxious parents. Mrs. Weasley shuffled closer to the mass of people, craning her neck this way and that, searching for her children.

"Mum!"

Mrs. Weasley turned in time to find Ginny rushing towards her. She knew at once something was not right. Ginny's face was anxious and she was barreling past her peers, rather than take a few minutes to wish them a happy holiday like she normally did. "What's wrong, Ginny?" Mrs. Weasley asked at once.

"It's Hermione. She was supposed to meet me at breakfast, before we got on the train, though she didn't, and I thought she was late so I went on to board the train and I thought she would be there but no one's seen her or Harry or Ron," Ginny said quickly, drawing in a deep breath once she had finished.

Now very concerned, Molly placed her hands on her daughter's shoulders, searching her eyes.

"Are you sure?"

"Mum, I'm positive. I've been looking for them since the train ride began; no one's seen any of them since the ball last night." Ginny's face was so pale, her freckles stood out against her skin, as though they had been drawn in with ink.

Mrs. Weasley began to look around, searching with old, yet alert eyes. Everywhere she looked she saw students reuniting with their families, all joy and laughter. Grasping her daughter's hand and tugging her along, she struggled along the platform, searching in vain for her redheaded son and his two best friends.

"I talked to Neville, too, and he said that they all seemed a bit off at the ball, just before they left. He was also looking for Hermione, and tried to help me find them, but no one's seen them," Ginny babbled on, close to tears as her mother came to a stop at the end of the platform. "What are we going to do, mum?"

Mrs. Weasley's heart was racing. She had been worried something like this would happen for some time, but she had not expected it so soon. She thought of the trio, of all their secret little meetings in the Burrow this past summer, how grim they had looked most of the time. With all the terrible things happening in the Wizarding World; the kidnappings, the attacks on Muggles and Muggleborns, the suspected infiltration of the Ministry and the increased Death Eater attacks, she knew Harry was determined to end it once and for all. And to think that

Hermione and Ron were with him! She should have felt proud, maybe even a bit angry, but it was impossible when all she could think was *what if they get lost, or hurt, or Merlin forbid, captured? They're only children after all!*

She longed to cry. They should have kept a closer watch on them all. But there was no time to waste. They had to take action.

As soon as they arrived at the Burrow, she left Ginny to explain the situation to Fred and George as she penned a carefully coded message to Arthur and other members of the Order.

After she had sent Errol off with the notes she rushed to the sitting room, where three of her children sat, ashen-faced and silent. It had begun to snow again, and she watched as the flurries of snowflakes made their way down to the ground.

"What do we do now?" Fred asked quietly.

Mrs. Weasley stared after Errol flying further into the darkening sky, his slight form growing fainter and fainter.

"We wait."

18. The Visitor

All associated with the Harry Potterverse rightly belongs to JK Rowling, not me.

Chapter Eighteen: The Visitor

“What are you doing here?”

This wasn't a question Draco was used to asking. Usually he was the one being asked this but now it was his turn as he entered the sitting room, still clad in his pajamas, his chest bare.

Blaise grinned at him from the opposite side of the room where he had settled himself quite comfortably.

“You're looking well.”

“As always,” Draco said. “But all the same-why are you here?”

It wouldn't do to tell the truth. News of Potter, Weasley, and Granger's disappearances had rocked the castle in the late evening not two days before. He had been surprised with everyone else, but was suspicious of Granger's the most, as Draco's plans from the year before had never come to fruition. Blaise had immediately known what must have happened, though not what led to it. He had been sure she was safe at Hogwarts, but when her dormitory proved uninhabited and she was not found anywhere in the castle, he had been wrong. He had heard and seen everyone's worry and remembered what she had told him the year before, and his insides coiled with worry though he tried to remind himself it was none of his business.

He had hastened here as soon as he was able, taking cover under guise of detention with Snape, who had supplied him his portkey. It had been on his mind for days. He had to set it right. Had Draco captured her at last? And if so, what would he do? What *could* he do?

Blaise raised his palms into the air, shrugging. “I haven't heard from you for days. Thought you might be ill.”

Draco smirked. “Not ill, just newly married.”

Blaise started. His stomach sank horribly.

So he was right. Poor Granger...

“Congratulations are in order, then. How did it happen?”

“A stroke of luck,” Draco said. “But it doesn't matter. She is mine and I am content with that.”

Granger's voice floated back to him. “*He'll do worse than this.*”

He looked away, pretending to fiddle with his sleeve. He felt ill.

“What a union that must have been,” Blaise remarked.

Instantly he wished he had said something else. The image of Granger’s marked neck flashed before him. Her terrified tears. If she had been captured, and if Draco had claimed her like he so wanted, he hoped at least she had been unconscious. He looked at his friend casually, hoping not to betray his own feelings, the uneasy revelation that his friend was a rapist. He hadn’t wanted to face it, even with Granger’s confirmation. And this was all his fault...

“I’ll not give you details, if that’s what you’re after.”

Draco ran a hand through his hair. In between checking on Hermione and making sure the House Elves were making lunch and that Hermione would have everything she needed, he hadn’t had the time to fix his hair, which was still messy from sleep. He usually was an early riser but that day he had chosen to sleep in; the contentment and satisfaction of sleeping with his bride in his arms had prompted him to sneak in a few more hours of rest.

His growling stomach had woken him sometime later, however, so he carefully left the sleeping girl in his bed and made his way to the kitchens, where he had ordered a large breakfast to be made for both him and his wife, but she had slept through it. Worried, he had checked on her quite frequently throughout the day, but there was nothing wrong with her. Aside from the obvious of course. He knew she would need time to heal properly since he had handled her quite roughly the night before.

A stupid grin began forming on his face and he bit the inside of his cheek to prevent it. That would be all the incentive Blaise would need to make assumptions on what had happened and badger him about it until he finally told him everything.

Blaise, meanwhile, was thinking the opposite.

Tread carefully, Blaise told himself. *If you give yourself away he will be angry, and he isn’t likely to forgive easily. You don’t know what he could do.*

“So will I get to see the blushing bride at all? Is she well?” Blaise asked suddenly, looking around as though expecting to find her in a corner. “Or have you gone and locked her in a cage so she won’t run away?”

“I don’t need a cage,” Draco said simply. “I’ve given her something far better.”

“Then where is she?” Blaise asked, fighting to not sound accusatory, but merely curious.

The tall blonde frowned. “She’s been sleeping all day. Hasn’t eaten anything.”

Who could think to eat when in a situation like this?

“What does she think of all this?”

“The same as before, but tenfold.” Draco envisioned her face, wet with tears and bright with her rage as he had attacked her. The pained moans she’d made when he’d pressed his palm over her mouth once he’d tired of her screams, her blood hot and thick on his fingers. What should he expect when she awoke? More hysterics or a calm fury? He was itching to see her again.

Blaise was frowning. Draco asked him what was wrong.

“What about Potter and Weasley?”

“What *about* them?” Draco asked indifferently.

“They’ve gone and disappeared from Hogwarts, around the same time you took Granger. The whole school caused a bloody ruckus over it all-I suppose I thought they wouldn’t have abandoned her like that.”

“More fool them. They wanted to keep her safe there at the school but like the willfull creature she is she went after them. Makes things easier for me, too-wherever they are I doubt they know she’s missing yet.”

“What will you do when they find out?”

Draco’s expression was pure contempt.

“I’ll stay right here and enjoy my wife. They deserted her when she needed them. It’ll give me pleasure to tell them they might as well have given me their blessing when they left her behind.”

“You’re not going to give her back, then?”

“No. Never.”

In the midst of their catching up Hermione sat huddled in the far corner of the bedroom, clutching her knees. It had been approximately a half hour since she had woken. There was no clock in the room, so she had counted the time herself. The room had darkened while she had been unconscious; she guessed it might have been around six p.m, but who knew if she was right? Perhaps she had slept into the next day and the sun had not come out yet. At most she had been here two days, but she wouldn’t know for sure unless she got Malfoy to tell her.

At the thought of his name, her entire body convulsed in disgust. Upon waking she had discovered most of her wounds had been healed and she had been bathed, her skin looked well-scrubbed and all traces of blood, semen and dirt were gone. But she could still feel him. She could still feel his hands wrapping around her wrists, around her legs as he moved her broken body around for his pleasure. If she stayed still enough she could almost feel the impact of his hips pounding against hers, could almost feel his hot breath washing over her feverish skin. For Merlin’s sake, she could still *smell* him on her. Every breath made her want to choke.

There were light bruises on her body where the magic had not been able to fully heal, and it still hurt to walk. She had lay in a groggy state of awareness upon waking, but once she realized she was on that bed where only a few hours ago he had just raped her, she had scrambled off the bed after covering herself as best as she could with a sheet, and had frantically searched the room for something to defend herself with when he came back.

That search had proved fruitless-had taken care to remove anything she might use to her advantage. Although she had come across a pair of metal shears in the bottom of one of his drawers, she found that she could not pick them up. Her first panicked thought had been that

he had drugged her and that she was hallucinating, but then remembered what he had said about the ring and she had slammed the drawer shut in a cold fury, and once she had somewhat calmed down she had begun to wonder how much time had passed since she had been taken.

Two days. Maybe more?

Harry and Ron were long gone by now.

She drew in a shaky breath and clasped her hands more tightly around her knees. It wouldn't do to think about that just now. Not now. *Not now.*

Her palms had grown clammy but she didn't notice until they slipped apart. One of her hands fell to the inside of her thigh. Automatically, she jerked it back to her knee, but not before feeling a small twinge of pain from the sudden contact.

Warily, she pulled back the fabric and inspected the area. There, high up on her inner thigh was a bite mark. She shuddered again. It looked fresh. Gingerly, she pressed the pad of her finger against it, and winced at the second dart of pain. Rolling her eyes up to the ceiling, she slammed her knees shut again and took another deep breath.

So he had taken her virginity. So what. She wouldn't lie to herself-she had been saving it, be it for marriage or someone special. In fact, Harry's little gift to her after the ball had made her realize she wanted to give it to him. What he had done for her, to her, had been the final piece to her puzzle. She was finally able to believe that she loved him. She still loved him, in spite of what happened after. It wasn't his fault she was here-it was her own for being such a fool. But now it had been taken from her in the most horrible way.

Her nails dug into her flesh and her breathing quickened.

It's okay, it's okay, she reassured herself. *What happened does not make you a bad person. You're a fool, yes, but you are not a bad person. You're not a virgin anymore. So what? Big deal.*

But she could still *feel* him.

The evidence lay clear before her that she had been cleaned and healed, she could see her skin was pink and looked fresh, could smell the sweet fragrance of the product that had been used to clean her hair and body, but when she looked at herself, all she saw was dirt.

It was like she had slathered herself in paste and then rolled down a very muddy hill. Along her neck, between her thighs, she could still feel his lips on her skin, marking her with his saliva, with his teeth and tongue. It was so horrible she longed to be cut off from all her senses. Hermione began to rub at her skin, and when that gave no relief she began to scratch. Fiery red stripes arose on her arms, her legs and chest but that didn't help either. She didn't realize she was screaming until a loud CRACK! startled her out of her stupor.

For one wild moment she thought the House Elf that stood before her was Dobby, and her jaw dropped in disbelief. How did he find her? Was he going to help her?

"Dobby? Oh, Dobby," she whispered, eyes frantic. "Help me, please. Get me out of here!" She reached out to the poor creature, and realized her mistake immediately after.

“Bogg is not Dobby, Lady Malfoy. Bogg is Bogg, and Bogg does not know this Dobby.” The elf croaked nervously, before taking a quick bow that let his great drooping ears graze the carpet. “Bogg is honoured to meet the new Lady Malfoy.”

Hermione blushed scarlet. “I’m not-I’m not a Lady, and I’m *not* a Malfoy. My name is Hermione Granger.”

The elf nodded at her statement and said nothing more. She could see the decided look in his eye-no doubt he would keep calling her Lady Malfoy. Had Malfoy put him up to this? Another loud CRACK made her jump and startled, she looked at the elf, who was approaching her with a pile of fabric in his arms.

“Master requested you wear this, my Lady.” He made a motion as though asking her to stand.

Hermione balked.

Now he was *dressing* her?

“But what is that?” she asked, eyeing the bundle. It didn’t look at all like jeans and a t-shirt, or even her Hogwarts uniform.

“It is clothes appropriate for the Lady of the Manor,” the elf said, motioning for her to stand again.

“Well I told you I am not a Lady,” Hermione said as evenly as she could, and ignoring the elf’s protests, she ran for the door. Distantly, she heard the elf apparate away.

One of the first things she had done upon waking was to check the door. Naturally, it had been locked. Even though she knew it was pointless, she went to the door out of desperation and began to strike her fists against it, nearly wrenching off the doorknob with her hands as she tried to open the door. It wouldn’t budge, and frustrated, she fell backwards in a heap, shaking with sobs. With all the force she could muster, she raised her leg and kicked the door as hard as she could repeatedly, waiting to hear it begin to splinter. Again and again and again she repeated the motion until her leg radiated with pain and she was almost out of strength. Breathing heavily, Hermione tried for one last kick. This one, she was certain, would be the one. Just as she began to bring her leg back to forcefully smash it into the door, she heard the lock turn and the door clicked open. Her leg dropped back down to the floor and she gaped at it for a moment before standing.

Cautiously, she made her way out of the room and into the wide corridor. The space was well-lit and beautifully decorated but there was only one thing on her mind: escape. There were so many doors-most of which were locked-but the only one she needed was the one that would take her outside. And in all honesty, she knew it was futile. She hadn’t a clue what she would do once she got outside. But at the present, she felt she would be safer out there than inside the mansion. He could be anywhere right now; he could be waiting to pounce on her from behind one of these doors or even lurking behind her, waiting to steal her into the shadows. With that thought, she chanced a look behind her only to reveal nothing out of the ordinary. Shivering, she grasped the sheet about her more tightly and moved on.

She ghosted through many corridors and snuck through spacious, polished rooms, only after having made sure there were no occupants inside. The halls were lined with large

windows covered with heavy drapes, but no matter how hard she tried to pull them apart to get a look outside, they would not budge. It was as though he had charmed them shut so she could not look out the window.

But why? She wondered. I've already been outside. Why would he want to keep me from looking out?

Voices cut through her thoughts and heart in throat she whirled around, half-expecting him to emerge from the drapes she had just tried to part.

Nothing.

The voices were still there, though, and that was the problem. There was more than one. Who was it, though? Careful not to make any noise, she followed the voices to their sources.

"Shouldn't you get going?" Draco asked irritably, scowling at his friend. He'd had enough of company for the day and was impatient to check on his wife.

"Alright, alright," Blaise stood, brushing off his dark suit. His eyes darted up. "But first I think you had rather teach your House Elves not to eavesdrop." He pointedly nodded towards the slightly open doors leading into the room, where they could just make out a slight figure darting past.

"That's my wife," Draco said sharply. He turned to Blaise. "Excuse me, if you will."

Blaise sat back down uneasily. Grinning, Draco bolted out of the room.

Oh Merlin, he saw me!

Her breathing was ragged though she tried to keep as quiet as she could as she fled through the many halls. She had taken a peep between the doors only to find Malfoy with his back to her talking to none other than Blaise Zabini. Though it had been silly of her, she had found herself hoping it would have been someone-anyone else. Someone who could help her, at least, but one look at him had made her turn pale-she had not forgotten her last encounter with him. The fear had glued her feet to the floor and in consequence she had stayed a fraction of a second too long, in which Blaise had caught her eye quite by accident, and like a startled deer, she fled just as Malfoy turned.

Just walking still hurt for her, so running was so much worse. She was certain that she would need crutches for the rest of her life; she had never run so much in so little time. Daily running was not a practice she was used to and after all the abuse she had put her legs through they felt like they were one step away from splintering into halves. All these horrible things happening right after each other-what was next? Would she ever be in peace? A fresh wave of pain from between her legs swept through her, and for a moment Hermione stumbled and almost dropped down to the floor.

The hall she had just turned into had a dead end. It was too late to turn back-he was after her. She could hear him calling out to her in a playful tone, which frightened her all the more.

“Come out, kitten! We’ve a guest!”

Choking back a sob, she flung open a door at random and hobbled through it. Seeing a staircase on the opposite side of the room, (*just how big is this place?*) she dashed for it just as he came through the door.

She wasn’t even halfway up the stairs when he caught her. One foot had just landed on a step and suddenly there were hands around her hips and she was hoisted over his shoulder. Immediately she began to pound her fists on his broad back, kicking at his chest as best as she could. Draco grunted in pain at the blows and held her ankles together with a wandless spell, even as she began to scream.

“Let me go! Let me go, you demon! NO!”

Her sobs clamored around them in the spacious halls and yet he did nothing to silence them. Hanging upside down wasn’t helping her condition, either. By the time he had come back to the sitting room where Blaise still sat, she was quite red in the face and had screamed herself hoarse.

And then she was sitting on his lap. He looked like he was holding back laughter, but his grip on her said different. She could hardly move under his hold, and when she tried to wriggle away, his hands tightened and he let out a harsh command.

“Stay.”

Of course she didn’t listen and tried to get up again, but discovered she could not move at all. Her feet were still bound together, her hands held the sheet around her but she was frozen by his magic.

“Not going to say hello, then, Granger?”

She jumped at the sound of Zabini’s voice, and sent him a baleful glare through a veil of tears in her eyes. Zabini gave her a strange smile-it might have been forced but she had been deceived by him before. She caught his eyes wandering down to her body, barely covered by the ill-positioned sheet, which had slid down and parted open quite a bit when Malfoy had hauled her back. She flushed, unaware of the still-healing bruises that were on display along her back and chest. Regret coursed through her-she should have put that damn dress on. As if he had read her mind, Malfoy pulled the sheet up higher to cover her better.

“Your disappearance has got everyone panicking,” Blaise said softly. “I suppose none of them know the happy news.”

Hermione cringed and turned away, cheeks flaming red. This was not what she wanted to hear. Malfoy’s hand rested on her back, rubbing circles into her skin and toying with locks of her hair.

“Are they looking for her?” Draco asked.

“Not as far as I know.”

Fresh tears fell down her cheeks. As she wiped them away she realized with horror that Malfoy’s hand had slid beneath the sheet and was now cupping the side of her breast, his thumb grazing her nipple lightly. Her breast felt more sensitive than usual and she tried to tear herself away to no avail-she still couldn’t move.

“Don’t touch me!” she snarled.

Malfoy gave her a cold look.

“Don’t what, love? Don’t do this?” He squeezed her breast gently, weighing it in his palm. Her body jerked at the touch and she twisted her head away, her face crumpled with disgust. He moved quickly so that she suddenly fell back against the side arm of the sofa they had been sitting on. He had positioned himself above her, his arms and legs trapping her underneath him.

“Leave, Blaise,” Draco said, and Blaise got up at once. Hermione understood what was about to happen, and began to panic.

“No... no, please,” she whimpered, looking at him beseechingly. “Not again, *please!*”

Neither of them noticed the look of utter helplessness on Blaise’s face.

Her hands were free! But there was no escape, and she couldn’t attack him, either. So her hands sought out the only protection she had—the sheet— and pulled it up more tightly around herself as he leaned in.

Their noses nearly touched, tears slid freely down the sides of her face as he sneered at her.

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do, pet. You’ve disobeyed me more than once now and I skipped the punishment because I thought I was too rough with you on our first night, but you’re asking for it. And I’ve news, kitten. That was me holding back.”

She turned away as he leaned further still to bury his face into her hair and locked eyes with Zabini, whose face now held no expression. Hermione screwed her eyes shut.

This isn’t happening.

“I can take you right here, right now, and have Blaise watch,” he spoke into her ear. “Or better yet, why not let him join in, if that will teach you not to disrespect your husband?”

“I thought you said you wanted me gone,” Blaise sounded a little uneasy.

“No, no, no, no, no, no!” Hermione cried, placing restraining hands against Malfoy’s chest as he began to peel the sheet away from her skin. He stopped, and just as she thought he would move away he crushed his lips to hers. It was a punishing kiss—he kissed her to bruise, to mark, and she winced as he pushed his tongue into her mouth as though he would die if he didn’t taste her that very second. When he finally pulled back she was gasping for breath, hiccuping through her tears. He cupped her face in his hands and tilted her head to face him. Leaning in once more, he kissed her softly, his tongue tasting the tears that had gathered at the corners of her mouth.

“Never deny me,” he whispered into her lips. Then he was gone and a stunned Hermione was left alone on the sofa as the two wizards left the room.

She didn’t know how long she had stayed in that state, but according to the clock on the wall it was nine in the evening when Bogg appeared, presenting her with a large tray full of food.

“Master says Missus must eat,” he implored, but she said nothing. Upon his insistence, she picked up a roll and broke it into small pieces, two of which she ate before he left. Once he had gone, she tossed the roll back onto the tray and touched nothing else save for a pitcher of water from which she drank directly. Malfoy and Blaise were gone; the silence in the room bore down heavily on her ears. There was nothing left for her to do but look around try to find out exactly where this Manor was located. That should not take too long, she reasoned. As she stood her legs shook but she set about her task quickly. *I need to get out of here*, she thought, wrapping her arms about herself.

19. Christmas

I own nothing. Having to say this so often is a little depressing. Only the plot is mine, if that even means anything.

Chapter Nineteen: Christmas

“You reject my advances and desperate pleas

I won’t let you let me down so easily,

So easily...”

I Will Possess Your Heart-Death Cab For Cutie

“That was a little harsh, don’t you think?” Blaise asked.

Draco turned away from the window. By grace of being the only room in the Manor that Hermione was not allowed access to, it was currently the only room that had its windows uncovered.

“It’s best for her to learn as soon as possible what she can and cannot do as my wife,” he said. “She’s always been stubborn and these events won’t make her more compliant by any means. The faster she accepts this the better.”

“By the looks of it that’s going to take a long time, mate,” Blaise said.

Draco let out an impatient breath. “I don’t care as long as she’s mine.”

“Alright,” Blaise said, eyeing his friend warily. “So what are you planning on doing with her, then? Just keep her in here for the rest of your lives?”

“Of course not,” Draco scoffed. “I’ve other estates across Europe; we’ll move around from time to time. The grounds for each are large enough that she can explore to her heart’s content. I’ve rare libraries that would satisfy that insatiable curiosity of hers, and if she ever requires anything else I’ll acquire it for her. And of course, each estate has plenty of beds...” he added, flashing his teeth.

Blaise hesitated before asking.

“Are you going to impregnate her soon?”

Draco shook his head. “Not so soon. I’ve only just gotten her, haven’t I? I want some time to enjoy her before a little brat comes up and takes up too much of our time. I’m thinking I won’t leave her with child for a few years.”

“Seems fair,” Blaise shrugged, feeling so relieved he almost laughed. That would give her plenty of time to escape. Draco stood, looking pensive.

“Actually,” he began, “There is one thing I want to make sure of...”

Hermione had been trying to pull apart the drapes for several minutes to no avail. Her hands ached; grasping the fabric so tightly though they wouldn't budge had left her with shaking fingers and strained muscles.

Why? Why wouldn't he want me to see what's outside? she asked herself desperately.

Deciding to move on, she crept along the hall silently. The marble flooring sent a cold shock through her feet with each step she took; her skin was raised in gooseflesh. Malfoy and Zabini had withdrawn to Malfoy's study-she had gleaned this information from Bogg, who had tracked her down a while ago, very upset that she had not touched the rest of her food. The poor creature had been beside itself with misery, banging its head on the wall and knocking himself in the head quite violently with anything he could reach until Hermione relented and ate a bit of chicken before managing to run off again. It hadn't occurred to her until now, but suppose Malfoy had poisoned the food or the water she had drank? A cold sweat broke over her and she cursed herself for not thinking this earlier.

Stupid! She thought to herself.

How large was this place? She had been walking and walking, and there was no end to the number of halls she had passed through. Countless doors loomed above her, enticing her to open them. At first, she had stayed far away from them, afraid of what-or who-those rooms could contain. But now, as the house stretched on and her curiosity grew she made up her mind to take her exploration to the next level.

The curious thing was that each door was exactly the same. Tall, heavy, made of a strong oak wood painted black with highly polished brass doorknob. There were no labels or markings anywhere indicating which room was which, she found herself wondering how Malfoy didn't get lost inside his own home.

But then, she supposed, he's probably lived here a while, and I shouldn't waste my time thinking about him.

That in itself was quite hard to do, contrary to her resolution, seeing as she was in his house, he had raped her, and perhaps the worst of all-she was his wife. He was everywhere, even if he was not with her at that moment, she could still smell his scent on her skin, though she frequently looked behind herself to reveal nothing, she kept hearing the faintest footsteps trailing along behind her. A shiver washed over her. She turned again, looking down the hall.

With only the artificial light to illuminate the place, (seeing as all the drapes were shut) there were shadows everywhere. The hall was sparsely decorated with a few paintings along the wall, only none of the inhabitants seemed to be present. She had been incredibly surprised to pass by a couple of famous muggle paintings that were incidentally, her favorite. They weren't prints, either. They were the actual paintings, and her mind had begun to wonder if he had stolen them or actually bought them.

At present, she had taken another step when she invariably knew someone was following her. It wasn't fear that made her stop and turn around. It was anger.

"I know you're there," she called, fists clenched, bracing herself for the sight of her captor.

"Don't curse me, alright?"

As she watched, Blaise appeared with a flourish of his wand, ending his Disillusionment spell.

"You're still here?" She narrowed her eyes.

"I was hoping to speak with you before I left," he said.

"Where's Malfoy?" she asked.

He raised his brow. "Oh, you care where he is, now, do you?"

Hermione blushed. "I couldn't care less about him. I hate him. I just want to know where he is so I won't run into him."

"He's on the other side of the Manor, Granger. No need to worry." She held the sheet more tightly to herself and backed away.

"How do you find married life?" he asked.

"I would rather be dead," she said angrily. "You know I didn't want this."

"I remember." He looked uncomfortable, and strangely, Hermione found small comfort in that.

Blaise's demeanor changed suddenly. Something about his eyes was off.

"Would you like to be shared between Draco and I?"

She cringed again. "Gods, no!"

"Why not try?" he asked, advancing towards her. "You might like it."

Something is wrong here.

"Get away from me," she hissed, her voice shaking. He didn't listen. Hermione walked backwards, not wanting to let him out of her sight. He seemed to have made up his mind about something and advanced faster. Her back met the wall, but just as he grabbed her she found a doorknob and twisted it and the two fell into the room.

"No!" she cried, struggling to crawl away. "Get off me!"

"Don't fret, cher," he whispered restraining her flailing fists. He knelt over her hips, knees on either side of her body, and leant in close. "I could make it pleasant for you. I don't like hurting my partners in bed unless they like it that way, which I'm sure you don't."

"I don't like it either way when I'm being forced!" she retorted, and kneed him in the groin. With a howl of pain he rolled off her, clutching himself as she fled the room, only to collide into Malfoy's hard chest. Before she could escape again he had gotten hold of her and gripped her shoulders tightly, leaning down to look into her eyes.

“Are you alright?” he asked softly, but there was anger in his eyes. “Are you hurt?”

She said nothing. Just him touching her again made the memories of that night come flooding back and made her remember the pain she had gone through, the things he had done to her. Her stomach plummeted to her feet and her skin turned to ice as she attempted to fight him off. He growled at her resistance and shook her roughly.

“Did he touch you?” he demanded.

She shook her head, wincing as his grip on her wrists tightened. Malfoy pulled her into the room where Blaise had regained composure, somewhat. Malfoy still had a firm grip on her, she tried yanking her arm out of his grip but he would only pull her back to his chest quite roughly.

“You didn’t hurt her?” he asked Blaise.

“Of course not.” Blaise sounded almost offended.

Hermione was confused. What was going on?

“What the *fuck*, Draco? You *Imperiused* me?”

“Did she respond in any way?”

“Just like she probably responded to you,” Blaise said angrily. “Thanks for the warning, you ass.”

“What the hell is going on?” Hermione asked.

“Nothing,” Draco said stiffly, and he grabbed her arm and nodded to Blaise.

“Goodbye, Blaise.”

He steered Hermione from the room. Hermione looked back, but Blaise had already turned his back and was leaving.

Draco, meanwhile, was still pulling her along. Hermione tried freeing herself of his relentless grip.

“Let me go! Let me go!” she shouted as they walked towards and unknown destination. “Tell me what’s going on!”

“It’s nothing you need to worry your pretty head about, my love,” he replied, pulling her along. It didn’t take long before they had come upon a door much larger than the rest; its brass doorknob was much more ornate than the ones on the others. Gently, Malfoy pushed her to it.

“Open it,” he said.

Hermione twisted out of his grasp at last and turned to face him. “What for?”

“Just do it,” he said impatiently. The threatening flash had passed through his gaze quickly but she had not missed it. With his heavy hands on her shoulders, she reached out and opened the door.

Inside was the largest and most beautiful library she had ever come across, and it must be noted that Hermione had been to quite a number of libraries. It was everything she could ever wish for inside one room. Tall bookshelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling, rows upon rows of bookshelves, spiraling staircases led to higher floors, magnificent fires roared away in their respective fireplaces where plush carpets and blankets and pillows lay tossed about in the most inviting way, as though beckoning her to curl up between them with one of the many rare books the library held. She detected several cozy little window nooks; half of which beheld stained glass windows, the other half must have had regular windows, but had been covered by expensive drapery. It was more wonderful than the Hogwarts library, which, for her, was saying something.

He watched her as she took it all in. Her eyes had widened to a comedic size, her mouth had remained disappointingly shut, but her body language said all he needed to know. She loved it. He grinned, rubbing little circles into her arms with his thumbs.

"It's yours," he whispered. She shivered as his cool breath washed over her ear, making a few strands of her hair flutter.

"I don't want anything from you," she said angrily. "Nothing you do now can ever take back what you've already done to me."

"I'm aware of that, pet. Nevertheless, it's yours. Happy Christmas." He cupped the back of her neck with one hand and with the other placed on the small of her back; he pulled the reluctant girl in for a kiss. She endured the kiss, not really feeling it since her thoughts were elsewhere.

It's Christmas. She shouldn't have been so surprised, the Christmas ball had just been a few days ago, and everyone would be on holiday now, wouldn't they? And now it was Christmas.

Tears came to her eyes. Harry and Ron were somewhere out there, alone, hunting for those Horcruxes. Did they even know it was Christmas? And what about the Weaselys? She fervently hoped they were alright. As for her own parents-she hoped they had had a nice Christmas, safe in Australia as they were. Malfoy's voice came to her as though he were three floors beneath her.

"Why so still all of a sudden?" he asked teasingly, kissing her breasts.

Hermione blinked and jumped in surprise. She was lying down on the carpet in front of the fireplace. He was straddling her; nestling himself between her thighs. She was naked; the sheet she had been using to cover herself lay discarded a few feet away, entangled with his own clothing. She felt nauseous.

"Do you have any idea what it does to me when you walk around covered in nothing but my bed sheet?" he asked, sucking at her neck. As she tried to push him away she heard him cast a Contraceptive charm, pressing his palm against her lower abdomen.

"Please don't," she pleaded with growing panic, shoving at his chest as he dipped down to suck on her nipple. "Please! It still hurts!"

He ignored her, pushing into her as carelessly as he did on their first night. He let out a long moan as he did so, but upon hearing her pained cry he stilled for a moment, wiping her

tears off her reddened cheeks. Despite her protests, he continued thrusting in and out of her, but more gently and slowly than before. She found she hated this. She would rather he do it as quickly as possible; with this sudden slowness the pain drove her half mad and added a sense of intimacy she didn't care for at all. It made her feel like she was a willing participant in the sex when she was anything but.

Once he had finished he had pulled a blanket over their bodies and wrapped an arm around the injured witch so she would not slip away while he slept. He fell asleep quite quickly, with a satisfied smile on his angelic face. For several minutes Hermione tried to pry his arms off of her to no use. He would simply tighten his hold around her. It seemed an age passed before she could feel herself begin to drift off into sleep, disgusted by the way his breath warmed her hair and face, the way his hand lay on her tummy. Just before she slipped into an uneasy slumber, she wondered if she would ever see her family again.

A/N:

Draco is a very very very jealous and possessive lover/husband/person in general. He wants to make sure Hermione isn't attracted to Blaise.

20. Monster

**EXTREMELY IMPORTANT AUTHOR’S NOTE AT END OF THIS CHAPTER.
READ IT.**

I own nothing.

Chapitre Vingt— As You Wish

“Are you hurting the one you love?

And if heaven knows then who will stop

Are you hurting the one you love?

You said you got to heaven, but it wasn’t enough.”

Are You Hurting the One You Love?-Florence and the Machine

There were tears nestled in the corners of her eyes when she awoke. It almost hurt to blink—her eyes burned from the tears and she hastily blinked them away as the remnants of her dream began to fade away.

Harry, coming to her aid when she had been frightened and easing her into sleep. The night of the ball when he had carried her to her bed and had made her realize she loved him. The way he had told her he loved her so sweetly just before she fell into the clutches of the Sandman. What little sleep she had gotten had been full of memories of Harry, each wrenching and tearing at her heart as they played through her mind. The words from his letter came with a fresh wave of pain.

I failed him, she thought sadly. He tried to protect me and in the end I failed him.

Just as she finished that thought she felt a hand running gently through her hair and having been lost in her thoughts, flinched violently. Suddenly the mattress dipped and he was there in front of her, brushing the tears from her cheeks. His cold eyes were tinged with concern.

“Why the tears, little bird? Did you have a nightmare?”

“I’m still living it,” she said softly, turning her head away from his hand.

“Don’t be so dramatic,” he chuckled. “It doesn’t become you. It’s not like your life is over.”

At his harsh words she heaved herself out of the bed, sharp words taking form in her throat.

"I'll be as dramatic as I please! You've taken me from everything I've ever known, everyone I've ever loved and locked me up inside this damnable place. I'm correct in guessing that I won't be allowed contact with any of my friends or family from this point on, am I? I can't even finish my education! You've given me this atrocious ring which won't let me fight back! You've taken my freedom and have the stones to say my life isn't over? That I should do as you say? I'll let you know now that won't ever happen, you thrice accursed troll spawn, so just leave me alone."

It had come out so fast and so loaded with hate that she was left without breath but it made no matter. He was going to hear every bit of it, and every day if need be. For good measure she spat on him, shivering in satisfaction when her spittle landed on his cheek.

Malfoy wiped the offense off his skin calmly, never taking his eyes off hers. The look he was giving her now-back at Hogwarts it would have made anyone quake in their boots or run away, and in one memorable case, make someone burst into tears. But here was the furious little witch who never failed to captivate him, raising her chin at him and giving him The Look right back. He knew without a doubt that if she weren't wearing the ring in that moment, she would already have flown at him with her fists raised, magical powers be damned. The thought aroused him a little, but his anger clouded over it instantly.

"Get up," he ordered loudly, and her nostrils flared.

"I am *not* your slave."

"You're right," he said. "You are my *wife*, not my slave, and I expect you to act as such."

"I won't," she shook her head, stepping back. "I'd rather die than play out this sick fantasy of yours."

"Speak with care, sweetheart, I am losing my temper."

"I couldn't care less about your temper."

"Then you should learn to," he said, and raised his wand. "Imperio."

He approached her silently, and Hermione fought to back away although the curse prevented it. Then his voice was in her head.

Take the nightgown off.

Instantly her hands wrapped around her middle, then down to her thighs to grip at the hem of the gown. Hermione grit her teeth and willed herself to stop even as her hands began to pull upwards.

No.

She tried to frown but the curse kept her face neutral-even as he came to a stop in front of her, looking as angry as he'd been when she'd looked back to see him at the window after she'd escaped.

His voice came again, softer.

Do it or I will rip it off of you.

Moving mechanically, she obeyed, and deposited the slip of fabric onto the floor. Throughout the ordeal he made her keep eye contact with him and she stood shaking in the cold air as she was exposed to the cold. She wanted to cover herself with her hands but they remained still and ignorant to her thoughts at her sides. Mortification burned at her face.

“Oh, you want it back?” he asked innocently, staring at her body, at the angry blush spreading on her chest. “Sorry darling, you’ll have to earn it.”

Her fists clenched ’til her knuckles turned white but she could not say or do anything else.

He turned abruptly and walked to the door, opening it but not stepping out. Turning to face her, he called, “Will you obey if I take the spell off or will I have to make you come?” When she didn’t move he sighed and turned away to hide a smile. She was still trying to fight off the curse. When would she learn?

They walked through several corridors and up a few flights of stairs. To chastise her further he made her walk in front of him, he avidly watched the unconscious sway of her hips-once or twice he couldn’t help himself and would give her bum a light smack. Once she managed to break free of the curse long enough to turn around with an angered shout on her lips but just as quickly he’d gotten her back under control.

The door they came to at last was different from the rest. It was painted a dark, blood red and had a rather large peephole that reminded Hermione of the ones in doors at Muggle hotels. Malfoy pushed it open, seeing as it had no doorknob or handle. Absently, in the pleasant fog clouding her mind, Hermione guessed he had spelled the door to open to only his touch.

The room was spacious but dark. The only light that came through the stained glass window was very weak-small spots of colour adorned the walls opposite, where there was another door leading into a bathroom, most likely. A simple, yet comfortable looking four poster bed was tucked into one corner-there was no other furniture other than a chaise and a table beside the bed. A fireplace took up part of the far wall, but it was apparent it had not been used in some time.

Now released from his spells, she turned to him, an unspoken question in her eyes.

“You wanted to be left alone,” he said simply. “So be it.”

He pushed her into the room as she tried to turn back into the hall but in a fit of rage she began to shout and claw at him he had to settle for tying her to the bed.

“Let me go!” she shouted, struggling to kick at him from the end of the bed where he was fastening her ankle to its corresponding post.

“Don’t tell me you’re having second thoughts already?” he asked mockingly.

“When I said leave me alone, I meant set me free and never let me see your face again,” she spoke through teeth clenched together.

“Ah, then perhaps next time it would do you better to be more specific,” he said sarcastically. “But even then I wouldn’t do it.”

He stepped away from the bed, staring at her prone form.

“I’ll be up later once you’ve calmed down to untie you. Bogg will bring you your meals, but from now on you are in solitary confinement. Until you’re ready to obey and respect me you will be here. Perhaps I’ll pay a visit every now and then, but don’t count on it, little bird, for you’ve made me quite angry.” Upon seeing her dubious expression he laughed. ‘Don’t worry, love. By the end of the week you’ll be craving some company. And I advise you to have reformed by then: we’ll meet with Mother and Father on Sunday, and the Dark Lord expects you soon after.’ A shadow of concern passed over his face before he turned away, heading for the door. “It would be in your best interest to do everything I say.”

The obscenities she shouted after him were silenced the moment he shut the door behind him. Out of curiosity he took a look through the peephole, only to find the girl still struggling against her bonds, stomach heaving with her screams. A twinge of regret made him almost change his mind—he didn’t like having to shut her up in here, but damn her, she was determined to be difficult. There were other ways of getting her to behave, but while he wanted to break her, he didn’t want to actually kill her. This was the gentlest punishment he could think of—and he had spent hours thinking up suitable punishments for Granger way before. This would be enough to subdue her for now—but it wouldn’t do the job completely, knowing her.

And if it doesn’t work? a quiet voice in the back of his mind popped up.

Then I take her out anyway to make the visits and she goes back in once they’re over, he decided. *Or maybe then it will be time to try something new.*

Unease filled him upon thinking of their appointment with the Dark Lord. This was the part that worried him the most. He knew the Dark Lord’s intentions were to find out what Potter and Weasley were up to, but how would he go about doing it? Would he torture it out of her? Or would he simply force her to drink Veritaserum? Or would it take something much worse?

He had been to many interrogation sessions with the Dark Lord. Most poor souls never got out alive, and the ones that did were beyond repair. He knew how headstrong Hermione could be—would she remain silent? Or would she talk? He had a sneaking suspicion she would say nothing, but at the same time he couldn’t help but wonder what it would take to get her to speak.

Against his better judgement, he peered into the room again. At first glance she appeared to be asleep but she turned her head just as he’d looked. At least she’d stopped her struggling. Her limp body lay taut and shivering in the cold room. He could see the silhouette of her nipples.

I’ll send her some blankets.

If he looked hard enough he could see the tears making their way down the sides of her face. He wanted to go and hold her.

It took some effort to turn away.

Wish I could let you out, my love, he thought to himself. *But I’ll not have you disrespecting your husband.*

He turned away and headed for his study.

Hermione wasn't sure how much time had passed since Malfoy had left her, but he was back what seemed like a day later although she was positive it hadn't been. The door hadn't made any noise as it opened so she had startled when she turned her head to find him leaning against the door frame with his arms crossed, staring at her intently. She opened her mouth at once to yell but he waved his hand dismissively at her.

"Save your breath. Though it pains me to leave you like this I'll not let you out." He reached the bed with a few long strides and began to untie her. 'Don't fight me, Hermione,' he warned gravely as she began to kick at him. "It will only make things worse for you."

She narrowed her eyes at him but lowered her leg, and blushed fiercely as he gazed at her body, curling into herself once she had been completely untied.

"Don't be ashamed, pet," he said softly, rubbing her arm as she tried to hide her body from his view.

As if he'd shocked her with a thousand volts of electricity, she jerked away from his touch, a small whine escaping her lips. After she'd sat up she held out her palm in a pleading gesture for him to stay away. Draco reached for her anyway, enveloping her in his arms, holding her tightly as she tried to get away. Hermione screamed but he pressed his lips to hers, muffling the sound even though she tried to push him off. Ignoring her furious cries, he kissed her roughly, demandingly, as though he wanted to devour her and then all at once the kiss turned gentle. His lips caressed hers softly, he scattered kisses on her cheeks and nibbled on her bottom lip, his hands cupping her face close to his so she wouldn't pull away.

He could taste the 'no's' on her lips.

When he finally backed away and dropped his hands from her she launched herself to the other side of the room, covering herself as best as she could. She was looking at him in the way an animal caught in a trap would as it watches its hunter approach. Draco scrubbed a hand over his face.

"I'll have Bogg bring you some books from the library," he said, and left without another word.

As soon as he was gone Hermione dashed to the connected bathroom and ran herself a scalding shower. She couldn't stand to feel him on her any longer; it would have driven her mad. As the shower began to heat up the steam swirled around her, and she desperately ran her hands through her hair, panting.

I have to get out of here, she thought. I must.

But how? Another voice in her mind piped up. You got yourself locked up in here. What lies outside these rooms but more locked doors?

Without hesitation Hermione stepped into the hot blast of the shower and gasped loudly, fighting for breath as the water came into contact with her body, searing her skin. She stood there, braving the brunt of the hot onslaught for several minutes. She looked around the shower and found a bar of soap and not caring for shampoo, began to clean herself. A washcloth appeared and she grabbed it quickly, rubbing it roughly over her skin, watching as the lather thickened and spread over her body. She had to be cleaner. Spotless.

Once she had finished two fluffy towels appeared on the rack opposite the tub and grateful to have something to cover herself with, she snatched them down quickly and wrapped her hair in one and her body in the other. She was surprised to find upon walking back into the room that the fire had been lit and the bed had been remade, with fresh, warm sheets. A tray of food laid on the bed, with a pitcher of water on the table. A small stack of books had been set up on the table, but she ignored them, enticing as they looked. Still suspicious of the food, she took only a roll and the pitcher with her, and sat down in front of the fire. Setting these things carefully to the side she unwrapped her hair and slowly patted it dry with the towel, staring into the bright heat of the fire.

Up until then she had forgotten Malfoy was bringing her to the Malfoy Manor to see his parents. Of this visit she wasn't too afraid-she had met them both before and while both were intimidating to a certain level, she found she feared Lucius more than his wife. No, it was the meeting with Voldemort she was most concerned about. While she knew he was the most dangerous wizard of all and that she might not come out unscathed from her own interrogation, she found that her pity outweighed her fear for the man-if he could still be called a man. He had grown up without love, without friends and what family he had left he had obliterated in his greed for power. She did fear him-to an extent-but she knew in the end he must die.

But what about Harry? Would he have to die as well? She asked herself.

She prayed he wouldn't. As much as he refused to believe it sometimes, they all knew everyone needed him. They needed someone to believe in now that Dumbledore was gone and that the war had begun. And if she ever got out of this place alive, he would be the first person she would go to. A tear slid down her cheek. It had only been a few days, but already she missed him terribly. She hoped that wherever he and Ron were, they were safe and warm, but more than anything else she wished she was there with them.

When Hermione awoke the next morning she found herself in the bed, her stomach growling loudly. The sheets were snugly tucked around her, the tray was gone but there was a new one on the table with a steaming breakfast on it. She got up slowly, blinking away the fog in her eyes. It was a relief to wake on her own, without panicking upon feeling his arms wrapped around her or noticing the intimate way he'd tuck her body into his as they slept. A glance toward the window didn't help much in discerning what time of day it was. The light was no stronger or weaker than it had been the day before. Brushing a curl from her eye, she made her way to the tray on the table. There was a note tucked underneath a bowl of porridge, and she picked it up, brows furrowed.

Bogg is terribly upset-he seems to think you find his food repulsive. I advise you to drop your scheme of starvation and eat up else I shall be forced to feed you myself and you wouldn't want that, would you? I might end up helping myself to that exquisite body of yours, and while that's going to happen anyway, I imagine you'd want to stave it off as long as possible.

I'll come up to see you in the evening.

—D

In one swift movement she had crumpled the note into a ball and hurled it into the embers of the fire, watching with satisfaction as the paper caught fire and began to burn.

Bastard. How dare he think he can threaten me? He's probably slipped something into the food, that's why he's so eager for me to eat. And with that final thought, she hurled the tray and its contents into the fire as well. It had only been burning for a few minutes when it disappeared-likely back to the kitchens. She hoped Bogg wouldn't be punished for it. She was sorry for hurting Bogg's feelings, seeing as he had been good to her. It wasn't his fault he had been born to serve Malfoy.

A spot of color caught her and she glanced at the piled books on the table. They looked familiar... too familiar. She edged towards them and picked them up, one by one. With a growing sense of horror, she realized the books were her own. The last one fell out of her hands and back onto the table with a thud. The covers stared up at her: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Anna Karenina*, *Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Secret Garden*, and the *Diary of Anne Frank*. All her own favorite books. Ice ran through her veins as she looked at them, eyes wide. Quickly, to make sure, she opened each to the first page, and was horrified to see her own name writ there.

How did he get them? How did he know?

He had said nothing of the books in the note. Perhaps he would tell her later. She had to know, she had to. How had he found her Muggle home? She thanked the gods above that she had thought to relocate her parents to Australia over the summer. The house had been left alone, though all their things were still there she had placed wards around the area to prevent anyone from coming near her home. So how had he found it? More importantly, had Malfoy been alone? Or had Zabini and other Death Eaters gone with them? Vomit rose in her throat. He had been in her room; he must have been in there for a while to find them, because even though her house was always neat and tidy, she had a habit of leaving her books in random places. And to think he had found all of her favorites...

And if he took more than just my books? She asked herself. But thinking on it more, she began to doubt it. Obviously he wouldn't have brought her Muggle clothing, seeing as he had had Bogg insist on her wearing that dress on her first day in his house. And what else would he have brought, anyway? Shoes? No, she decided. The books were probably the only thing he took.

It was later in the evening that Draco entered the room to find the girl sitting on top of the table, eating a peach that had been served with her dinner. She was still clad in one of the towels he had sent up earlier for lack of other clothing and her hair fanned out over her shoulders in a tousled heap. He smiled and advanced towards her. She, who had not seen or heard him enter, jumped when she found him standing beside her. Before she could speak he reached out slowly and ran his thumb over her bottom lip gently, where the fruit's juice shone. She swallowed hard, looking at him with contemptuous eyes.

"Don't mind me," he said, removing his hand, only to lick at his thumb. "Help yourself."

Despite his order she slammed the peach down back onto the tray in the empty soup bowl. She felt guilty and stupid for eating the food, but it had been quite a while since she had eaten

a decent meal. Though she had tried to stick to eating solely the rolls, it simply was not enough to assuage her appetite, and so she had caved and ate everything.

“How did you get my books?”

Malfoy nodded. He had been waiting for her to ask. “After my failed attempt to kidnap you after the Masquerade Ball I searched up your Muggle home out of... *curiosity*. The Dark Lord assigned a few other Death Eaters to accompany me in case we came across your parents. There was no one in the house when we broke through the wards. The house was alone; there were still dishes in the sink so we assumed they had gone to work. Some of the men wanted to wait them out so we could take them anyway but the Dark Lord needed them for another event that was to take place that day. And besides,” he tipped his head, ‘I had a feeling you were already one step ahead of us all, little witch.’ Though her face remained neutral, he saw how all the blood drained from her face and he smirked. “In that case, darling wife, I should advise you to hide that knowledge as best as you can if you want your parents to remain hidden.”

“Why are you helping me?” she asked suspiciously.

He shrugged. “I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

She scoffed. “That’s bollocks.”

He narrowed his eyes at her and before she could move away he had forced himself between her knees and held her wrists in his hands. He ignored her protests and leaned forward staring angrily into her frightened eyes.

“If I liked hurting you, pet, then I would have hunted your parents down that day. I could have killed Weasley last time I saw him, since the Dark Lord insists on one but himself can kill Potter. I could have whipped you or Crucio’ed you in order to get you to behave instead of locking you in this room like a little Rapunzel. There are many, many ways of getting you to obey but I chose this one because I care about you, Hermione.” She twitched at his use of her given name-he could tell exactly what she was thinking.

“I’ll call you by your name as much as I like. You might as well get used to it and start calling me by mine. Say it.”

“No,” she snarled. “You don’t get to call me that, not after everything you’ve done. I haven’t given you the right.”

Angry, he squeezed her wrists in his strong hands, making her cry out in pain. His arousal rubbed against her core and he groaned, grinding his hips into hers.

“Say it, Hermione!”

“No!”

A vicious oath escaped him and he let her go, and without missing a beat she slid off the table and ran for the door but it wouldn’t open. He locked the bathroom door just as she ran to it, and helpless, she glared at him.

“You’re determined to make things harder for yourself,” he said, shaking his head.

“And you’ve made it your goal to make me hate you more than is humanely possible,” she snapped.

He ignored her and drew out his wand again. “Imperio.”

She stiffened as the curse took hold of her and he bade her come to him. “Say it,” he ordered.

Her lips moved but no sound came forth. He concentrated harder on the spell, watched as her eyes lost some of their focus.

“Louder!”

“Draco.”

He smiled. “That wasn’t so hard, now, was it? Now lie back on the bed.” She did so, and kicking off his shoes, he crawled atop her, unwrapping the towel to reveal her body. Once he was done with the contraceptive charm, he kissed her hungrily, palming her breasts in his hands.

“You will want this as much as I do,” he ordered, and at once her arms flung about him, her hands clutching at his defined arms as he dipped his tongue in and out of her mouth, one hand travelling down to the junction between her thighs. A small gasp that might once have been a terrified cry met his ears but her hips still jerked up and pressed against his as he slid his fingers in and began circle around her clit slowly. Parting her legs more widely to accommodate him, she moaned-a low, heady sound that sent a shock through him and made his body tighten considerably. She clutched his neck and bent him down and pressed her lips to his, her hands pushing through his hair and pulling at it hard enough to make him moan loudly. Already she was burning for him, pressing herself into him, the feel of it all so closely reminded him of all the dreams he’d had before but here with him was the real thing and he preferred her very much over them.

The look in his eyes was absolutely predatory as he grabbed her leg and hooked it over his shoulder, angling her hips upwards. A motion of his hand summoned a pillow to rest underneath her hips. Hermione, in the meantime, had managed to pull down his trousers with her foot-a task that would have been harder had he not unzipped them mere moments ago. Draco arched his back so his body pressed into her more deeply-his erection was getting to be too much as he worked his fingers around her clit, feeling her arousal coat his fingers as she ran her hands all over him. She moaned his name loudly and he grinned into her mouth and pulled back, starting to unbutton his shirt when she reached up and pulled it over his head impatiently, mewling with need.

Those little sounds of desire were enough to make him delirious with want but he managed to restrain himself long enough to slip out of his trousers as she watched with hungry eyes. Her thighs fell apart as he crawled between them and he took her nipple into his mouth, sucking hard as she gasped and arched into him, eager for more. Restless, her hips pressed against him, more urgently each time. Draco took his penis and rubbed the head along her labia slowly, teasingly, then positioned himself, hissing softly with pleasure as he sheathed himself inside of her. She exhaled loudly and sharply as he began to move slowly, but with sure, powerful strokes that made her breathless and sent violent jolts of pleasure up and down her body. The bed rocked as his thrusts became rougher and their bodies became dewy with

sweat, the sound of their flesh colliding rang loudly in the otherwise silent room. His hand resumed its attentions to her clit, varying in speed and pressure until her toes began to curl and she raked her fingers on the skin of his back, leaving weeping red gashes in their wake as he groaned and slowed down his pace. The way she drew him in, how *right* it felt to be inside her, Draco sensed he could very quickly become addicted to this. Hermione grabbed at his backside and pulled him in deeper, head rolling back as she reached climax at the same time he did. Still thrusting, Draco attacked her neck with his lips and his teeth and he crushed his lips to hers as he finished draining himself into her, feeling lightheaded once he was done. He pulled out, never taking his eyes from her flushed face, and kissed her softly.

Without thinking he ended the Imperius and she blinked for a moment or two, not seeming to realize what had just happened. It all seemed to crash down on her mere seconds later-the flush disappeared from her face as she began to cry.

“*How dare you?*” she screamed, pushing at his chest. ‘How *dare* you force me to enjoy my own rape?’ Fat teardrops rolled down her face as she hauled herself to the other side of the bed. “You abhorrent, *vile*-!” She tried striking at him but he caught her arm in time and pinned her to the bed, watching her with a grave expression on his face.

“Let me go!” she shouted, snatching up the towel with her free arm and covering herself as best as she could with it.

He let go and she huddled against the corner, shaking with disgust at what she had just done-what he had just forced her to do.

“You’re a monster,” she hissed. Her words were choked with grief. “I hate you.”

“I know,” he said quietly. She looked unwell, as though she would collapse, but as he took one step forward she flung out her arm and stopped him in his tracks.

“Leave me alone,” she spat hatefully, and he regarded her coldly for a moment before saying, “As you wish,” and summoning his clothing with magic, he left the room.

Hermione showered again that night, only she refused to leave the shower once she was done, preferring to stay under the hot blast of the shower head with her eyes screwed shut, willing herself to forget what had just happened.

(Had to delete the original chapter this was in b/c I didn't realize it was against the rules. Sorry!)

I have stated before and will state again (because there seems to be a few of you who don't bother reading my notes) that I do not support or condone rape at all. My stories are not meant to “glorify” rape.

If you don't like my story, then don't read it. I've posted so many warnings again and again and it's like a lot of you don't bother reading them. All it takes is a click of a mouse. This kind of story isn't for everyone. It has dark themes and frankly not a lot of people can deal with that. I've gotten lots of messages from people who have decided to stop reading because of how dark the story is. I'm sorry about that, but there are so many lovelier fics you can find on this site, I assure you. Go read one of those and forget about mine.

Thanks for your time,

C

21. A Little Ray of Sunshine

I OWN NOTHING. *cries into soup*

Chapter Twenty One: A Little Ray of Sunshine

Harry lay gasping on the frozen ground, shaking violently in the cold. Droplets of freezing water rolled off his bare skin, dripped into his eyes from his hair and sank into the hard, cold ground. Ron crouched at his side, frantically peering into his face to see if he was okay.

“That was one of the stupidest things you’ve ever done, mate,” he said, and Harry gurgled out a laugh between spitting out mouthfuls of water. The sword of Gryffindor lay at their side, dangerous and mystical, gleaming in the light of the moon.

“Imagine if Hermione were here,” Ron continued. “She would have found another way to get the sword without you having to strip down to your pants.”

Harry forced out a laugh, trying to ignore the stabbing pain in his heart when he thought about Hermione.

“How the hell d’you think the sword ended up here?” Ron asked on their way back to the tent. Harry dove to the beds and wrapped a blanket around himself, putting his glasses back on.

“Someone must have sent it,” Harry said. “There’s no other way.”

Draco didn’t visit Hermione for the next couple of days. He made sure she was sent what she needed and that she was eating above all else. He would not let her starve in his care. He kept himself busy, cooped up inside his study, looking over blueprints and plans and talking to Blaise, who would frequently pop in and out of the Manor. Blaise was the only person he truly trusted, he was his best friend and Draco knew he could count on him, so he had given him access to his Manor, adjusting the wards so that they would let him in. Even though Blaise had his own life and had other things to do back in Hogwarts Draco was grateful his friend visited so often. Living in hiding wasn’t always easy, and though he had Hermione now he found he still craved company.

‘I hate you,’ her words sliced through his mind, and rubbing his temples, he sighed. Of course she hated him. Look at everything he had done to her! But that didn’t take away the hurt he still felt. He had been so happy and then she had cut him down from his high with those three words. Part of him wanted to punish her for it, but he decided against it in the end. He couldn’t stop her hating him. Anything he did would only add to the fuel so there was no

point. Unless there was some kind of potion that could eradicate her hatred he could do nothing.

You could always Obliviate her, a voice in his mind suggested, and he paused, his grip on the quill he had been holding slackened.

It would work, too, the voice continued. *She wouldn't remember anything that had happened before and all you would have to do is feed her a lie or two and she'd eat it up and will be yours for the wooing. She wouldn't remember the kidnapping or the rape-she wouldn't even remember how you met, and you could both be happy.*

The voice was seductive and low and he found himself seriously considering it as he walked aimlessly through his home. Only perhaps his walk wasn't innocent as he thought because he found himself heading towards her room. His hand gripped his wand in a tight fist, his knuckles turning white from the pressure as he reached her door. He looked through the peephole and found her at the window, striking her fists against it repeatedly. He could tell she was using all her strength by the way she threw herself into each blow, her hands looked broken and bloodied and he winced as she continued her attack against the glass that would not yield. It wasn't possible to tell if she was screaming or not-he had soundproofed the room and all he could see was the back of her head. She was wrapped in one of the bed sheets; he could see the tight knots holding it together from where he stood.

She's in pain, the voice hissed. *You could make her forget it all.*

He nodded, watching as the girl collapsed onto the floor, cradling her broken hands in her lap as she brought her knees to her chest. The tears glinted brightly on her distraught face, catching his eye.

Could I do it? He asked himself. *Would I do that to her?*

The idea was extremely tempting-but was it worth it? Did he want her to forget everything? How they met? The first time he called her a Mudblood? Her slapping him in Third year and everything else? Their first kiss? Granted, all those memories weren't the happiest but he supposed those instances had been what had slowly led to his falling for her. It would be a shame if she didn't remember them too. Not only that-exactly how much would the spell take away? He eyed his wand warily, unease tingeing his nerves. If she wouldn't be able to remember him, would she remember Potter and Weasley? In short, would she still be the same person?

He looked again. She had fallen asleep, her head slumping forwards and her curls draping over her arms and chest. She had exhausted herself and there was the price she paid. Draco opened the door and stepped through to the girl. There was pain on her face, even in sleep, just like on their first night. Her hands were inflamed and swollen; he swiftly knelt down before her and took them in his as gently as he could. She stirred a little but did not wake, and relieved, he cast one healing spell after another until her face relaxed and her hands were good as new. He brushed her hair back and picked her up, depositing her in the bed as gently as he could. Once he had covered her with the duvet he stepped back, wand held at his side.

Now's your chance, the voice hissed.

Shaking his head, Draco backed away from the bed, tucking his wand back into his pocket. He wouldn't do that to her. Turning around to leave the room, he stopped short when he heard

the girl on the bed groan and mutter something in a raspy voice.

He turned and strode back to the bed where Hermione was groggily pulling herself up into a sitting position, one hand supporting her body on the bed and the other cupping her throat as she tried to clear it.

Draco sat on the edge of the bed, not failing to notice how she shrank away from him. He caught her left hand in his though she tried to pull away and held it in both of his, lightly toying with the ring.

“Why are all the windows covered?” she asked. “Why can’t I see outside?”

The ends of his lips curved upwards into a faint smile that disappeared when he turned to look at her.

“The God of the Underworld lived in the darkness; he lived in death, because Death was him. He fell in love with Persephone, the Goddess of spring and innocence, daughter of light. She brought light and warmth wherever she went and the God of the sleeping and the dead decided he must have her as his own. He took her from her home, from the light and brought her to the Underworld to be his queen.”

Hermione stared at him, a dumbfound expression on her face. “So metaphorically speaking, you’re telling me that I’m in the Underworld.”

Chuckling, he straddled her, leaning over her prone form as she whimpered and clutched the sheet about herself.

“I am your Lord,” he said, his lips brushing against her skin.

She spat on his cheek. “Go to hell.” He laughed, cupping her face in his hands, and said in a low, low voice. “When will you learn, pretty little bird? We’re already here.”

“That still doesn’t explain why you won’t let me see outside,” she argued. ‘I’ve already been there,’ (she shivered violently upon remembering that terrifying night) “so what’s the point?”

“The point is that it’s your punishment, Hermione,” he said, a little angrily. “When you start behaving you’ll be allowed more freedom.”

“I will never be even remotely close to freedom as long as I’m under you,” she hissed. His eyes darkened and he smiled-she didn’t get the double meaning in her own words until he pressed his lips to hers. He shoved his hands beneath her to grope at her bottom and she gave a startled “oh!” when he slipped a hand beneath the sheet wrapped around her and plunged two fingers into her, hissing his displeasure upon finding her dry. He began to thrust, teasing her clit with his thumb, but she couldn’t bear it.

“Please!” she gasped, “Stop!”

He paid her no attention, continuing his movements until with a mighty effort she wrenched herself up quickly, restraining his greedy hands.

“Don’t,” she pleaded shakily. “Please, M-Draco.”

She had surprised him-that much was evident by the look on his face. She still held back his arms, away from where they had been moments prior. She, who could barely look at herself in the mirror without feeling disgust because she could still feel him on her, was touching him of her own volition. Even though it was to keep him from using her, the touch had shocked him nonetheless. But as fast as the shock had come, it fled in an instant, and he tore his eyes away from her hands to meet her eyes. The confusion, the surprise was gone in them, and once more the iciness had resurfaced.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t touch me,” she whispered, flinging her hands away from his and settling back to her legs to pull the sheet down where he had pulled it high. “I can’t bear it.”

“I’ve touched you before, pet,” he said. “What’s the difference now?”

“THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE!” she shouted. “I CAN’T STAND YOU!”

Draco stared at her for a moment, no expression on his face. He raised his hand, and she recoiled, thinking he was going to beat her, but was shocked when his hand stroked her cheek, brushing her tears away and he tilted her head to face him again.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and she was rendered mute at the actual sincerity in his eyes, “but I can’t let you go. I won’t. You’re mine now.” She turned away, heaving wracking sobs that turned into cries of fright when he wrapped his arms around her and laid them both down on the bed. Hermione pleaded and fought to free herself but he would not relent, and once it was clear he was not going to rape her she calmed somewhat, though she was still stiff and frozen in his arms.

“Get some rest,” he pressed a kiss into her curls. “We’re to visit Mother and Father tomorrow.” How he had come to the conclusion that that was the right thing to say at such a time was beyond her-if she had not been anxious before it was damn sure she was now. He could feel her tremble slightly and he drew the covers over them, pressing himself more firmly into her from behind, rubbing a soothing circle into her stomach.

The Malfoy Manor was large and imposing; the elegant black structure stood proud surrounded by lush, beautiful gardens. Tall, well groomed hedges lined the path leading to the Manor and the grounds that wrapped around it, pure white peacocks strutted about, occasionally bending their long necks to pick at something in the ground.

It had been a quick and terrifying morning-Malfoy had woken her with a deep kiss, and startled, she had flailed around to get him off. He was already dressed in one of his usual impeccably tailored suits, the second she’d caught glimpse of it she had remembered the agenda for that day and shuddered, leading him to break the kiss with a chuckle and pull her from the bed as though she were some sort of rag doll.

“Bogg is waiting in the bathroom,” was all he said and pushed her across the room to the bathroom door. Hermione stumbled, her eyes were still unfocused from sleep and it didn’t register to her that she was nude until the door opened and the steam from the tub rushed out to lap at her skin. Instantly she had covered herself and turned to Malfoy, who was holding the sheet in one hand and her bum with the other. She snarled an insult and before she could

protest that she didn't want a bath, that she could do it herself, and that she had no intention of going to visit the Death Eater and his wife, he had slapped her quite hard on the ass and shut the door behind her.

Bogg ignored her protests and practically tripped her into the bath; when she resubmerged, gasping for air he had set to washing her hair. A half hour of embarrassment and anger later, she was all but kicked out of the soaking room, wrapped in a fluffy towel and shaking, her sodden curls plastered to her skin. She stood there, shaking, and Malfoy, who had been seated on the bed rose and pulled her to the table where a pile of neatly folded clothing lay. He began to peel the towel away from her body and she scrambled away immediately.

"I'm not going," she declared, and felt a wave of nostalgia as memories of her younger self saying the exact same thing to her parents hit her. Tears formed in her eyes and she blinked them back along with the memories.

He scoffed. "Hermione, you're going," he said seriously. "They're eager to see you."

"I don't want to see them!" she snapped. "I don't want to see the people that raised this demon before me! Let. Me. Go!"

He stood before her, having caught her wrists in his hands and he squeezed them hard enough to make her cry out in pain. His eyes connected with hers as he leaned forwards, making her bend backwards as though it would make her bend to his will.

"I'm giving you a choice, Hermione. Either you cooperate or I'll Imperius you again. Be a good girl or I'll have to punish you."

She glared at him, hate sparking in her eyes and he resisted the urge to kiss her. She still needed to get ready, after all. With a sharp tug he pulled her towel off and grabbing the bra that lay on the table, he began to loop it through her arms. Blushing furiously, Hermione slapped at his hands.

"I can dress myself!" she snarled, and he laughed before dropping his hands and handing her the clothing he had chosen for her, then going to sit on the bed. Keeping her jaw clenched and her body hidden as best as she could, Hermione rushed to cover herself. The quality of the clothing was much finer than what she was accustomed to; the lingerie itself made her eyes widen and her anger rise, and was relieved when she practically threw on the lilac dress and the simple (yet costly looking) heels. She turned to face him at last, her fists clenched by her side, and stumbled back in surprise as he pressed his lips against hers. His arms wound around her to fasten something around her neck, when he pulled back she looked down to find a beautiful diamond necklace adorning her collarbone and he was already fastening earrings on her ears.

"Do you like them?" he asked.

"I don't want your jewels," she said stiffly. "You make a mockery of my enslavement."

With a wave of his wand her hair was completely dry and pulled back so that her curls flowed down to her waist.

"You look beautiful," he murmured, "just as you always do."

She refused to look up at him; she felt as though the jewelry and the clothes were weighing her down to the ground. Absentmindedly she remembered the ring and without knowing it, she rubbed her knuckles against her thigh in a quick manner.

“You are my wife,” he told her gently. “I know you see it differently but this marriage does not have to be so uneven, sweetheart. All you have to do is play your part. Remember that.”

She had ignored him, and he chose not to punish her, knowing how nervous she must be.

They had apparated to the Malfoy Manor after a quick breakfast (meaning he had almost forced some juice and eggs down her throat), and now they were heading up the steps to the grand front doors. Before Malfoy could even touch the knocker one of the doors opened and an ancient House Elf bowed to them.

“Master Draco, we is honored by your visit,” it croaked. “Mr. Malfoy is waiting for you.” Draco inclined his head and stepped through without another word, pulling Hermione along, who was absolutely reluctant to enter and mortified that he had linked his arm through hers.

She couldn’t help but balk at the interior of the grand house. Where she had expected dark colouring equal to the outside of the house, the decoration was light and pleasing, though it could still be deemed lavish and opulent. It was as though she had stepped inside one of the pictures she had often gazed at in the home design zines. Sunlight streamed through the arched windows, illuminating the tasteful rooms they passed through. Draco kept a tight hold of her, carefully watching her reaction to his childhood home. That she was surprised was evident however much she tried to hide it.

“Contrary to everyone’s belief, I did not grow up inside a coffin,” he said lightly. She said nothing.

At last Draco steered Hermione into a study, which she correctly assumed was his father’s. This room had seen better days, she thought to herself upon looking around. The furniture must once have been of great value but had suffered abuse at some point in time; there were deep scratches and scuffs and even what she thought looked like a scorch mark. Two tall bookcases were filled to capacity with dusty old tomes and odd bits and ends that looked as though he’d gone picking things off the streets in Knockturn Alley. Either that or he’d been frequenting Borgin and Burkes for a long, long time.

“Father?” Draco called.

There was no one at the desk nor at the window. In fact, there was no one inside the room other than herself and Malfoy, who, infuriatingly, still had not let go of her arm.

“Congratulations are in order, I believe,” Lucius’s amused voice came from directly behind them and Hermione bit her lip sharply to keep her gasp from being heard.

The elder Malfoy stood, regal as ever, but the thing that unnerved Hermione was the fact that he was absolutely beaming at them. Rather, at her. She took a step back but Draco brought her forward again, wrapping his other arm around her waist.

“And how is the new Lady Malfoy?” Lucius asked, bending forward slightly. She knew he was waiting for her to offer her hand but she couldn’t bring herself to do it. This was too bizarre. Bizarre and totally unwanted. She squirmed as Draco’s fingers dug into her waist and

reluctantly brought her arm forward, unable to control the way her arm jerked a little as Lucius grasped it and brought it to his lips.

"Don't be afraid, darling," Draco teased. "He won't eat you."

"Can't say the same for you, my boy," his father said, grasping his shoulder and looking at Hermione with appraising eyes. "I knew you would choose wisely. She is divine."

The way they looked at her, as though she were some prized racing horse made her feel sick.

"And of course no one is going to mention the fact that I am here against my will," she said angrily, trying to wrestle herself out of Draco's hold.

"Remember what I told you," Draco said through grit teeth.

"You didn't tell me anything, you *threatened me*, you sod!" she hissed, and winced as he gripped her upper arm tightly.

"Miss Granger," Lucius began. "I am aware things may have been rough for you—"

"**Rough?** You try being kidnapped and then raped repeatedly!" Hermione hissed. "What if I hid you from all your friends and family and just about did everything possible to ruin your life?"

Draco had had enough. With a quick motion he brought out his wand and jabbed it into her throat, muttering an angry 'Silencio'. Hermione fought against him but he held her too tightly for her to do much. He pushed her to a seat and forced her down into it, heavily placing his hands on her shoulders to keep her still. Lucius strode to her front and leaned against his desk, watching her. The pleasantries had gone from his eyes and they were once again cold and menacing, just as she was used to.

"You may be resistant of the idea, my dear, but the fact remains that you are married to my son. What's been done has been done, and there is no going back. My son goes after what he wants, and you can be sure that there's no escape for you, so I suggest you wipe that frown off that pretty little face and accept it."

Hermione was mutinous. This was outrageous. This could not be happening. Malfoy's hands kept her practically glued to the chair, it was all she could do to not groan in pain. She knew he was angry, and that he would punish her later, but she didn't care. They had to know this was wrong.

"Has she given you much trouble?" Lucius was asking his son.

"Nothing I can't handle," Draco said smugly. Hermione nearly wrenched herself out of the chair with the wave of fury that hit her, but Malfoy muttered another spell and she found herself strapped to the chair.

"And will I be a grandfather soon?"

Hermione blanched. She could feel the blood draining from her face.

"Not for some time, Father. I want to enjoy her before I have to share her with our children."

Children. Plural. She fought down the nausea that rolled around in her stomach. No. This was degrading. *'Enjoy her?'* Draco's hand trailed up to cup her chin and furious, she snapped at it with her teeth, drawing a loud oath from him.

Lucius laughed. "It seems you still have some things to teach her."

"I will," Draco promised, "and I'll enjoy it."

Suddenly Hermione found herself freed from the chair and Malfoy hauled her to her feet, gripping her arm with one hand and her throat with the other.

"I warned you, pet," he hissed in her ear. "Now you're in for it." Hermione gulped, but she kept her eyes ahead, refusing to look at him even as he tried to force her to meet his eye.

"Imperio."

Once again the pleasant waves washed over her, loosening her limbs and forming a smile on her lips. Her anger and fear were squashed down to the very bottom of her stomach so that she only felt eager to please and happy. There was an ominous cloud in her mind, threatening and dangerous and she knew that was how Malfoy felt now. Part of her didn't care; she wouldn't play along with their façade like everything was okay. But the majority of her, the part of her that was under his spell was terribly anxious. She felt terrible for having embarrassed him in front of his father and wanted to beg him to forgive her. She didn't want him to be angry with her.

Draco sat down in the chair she had previously been in and patted his knee expectantly. She could hear his command in her head and swiftly sat on his lap, slinging one arm across his neck and shoulders and the other on his chest, leaning against him like a picture from the cover of a romance novel. Lucius watched amusedly from his desk, holding a tumbler of Firewhiskey to his lips.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself, pet?" Draco asked gravely.

Hermione pouted, looking up at him from downcast eyes. "I was disrespectful and embarrassed you. Please forgive me."

"I don't know, my love," he said absently, smoothing his hand over her curls. "I don't think you've fully grasped your situation yet. You don't seem all that sorry. So say it."

The words were on her tongue, waiting to pass through her lips, but she struggled against his pull and her own will to not give in to him.

"I.."

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I-I'm your wife," she finally gasped out, her lips trembling.

"Whose wife?"

"Yours," she whispered faintly. "I'm yours."

He practically purred, his hands running down to rest at her waist in a possessive manner. "And?" he prompted.

"You own me," she said, and a tear fell out of her eye and landed on his sleeve. "My place is with you."

"That's right," he said smugly. "You're mine now."

"Will you forgive me, my Lord?" she turned her large eyes up to meet his pleadingly.

"I forgive you, pet," he said, "but you're still due for a punishment."

"I understand," she said quietly.

A slow clap startled them from their interaction and they looked away from each other to Lucius, who had gone towards the door.

"Well managed."

"Thank you, Father."

Lucius opened the door.

"I figure you will not want to waste time with other pleasantries. Your mother is waiting to see you."

Draco eased Hermione off his lap and stood quickly, pulling her after him to the door where his father stood waiting. "Of course."

Draco walked ahead of them, having released Hermione from the Imperius and his hold in his haste to see his mother. The second he had let her go Hermione had made a mad dash in the opposite direction, only to screech to a halt upon finding the elder Malfoy in her direct path.

"Going somewhere, are you?" he asked, smiling.

"Get out of my way."

"I can't do that," he said gravely.

Hermione chanced a look behind her. Draco was gone. She turned back and tried to advance again at the same time Lucius stepped forward.

"Please," she said. "You can't possibly be in accordance to this. This is illegal!"

"In our culture it is not, my dear. You think you are the first slave I have seen? Granted, you are the first to be married to your Master, but this is still no strange occurrence for our society."

"Oh, Gods." Hermione clutched at her stomach. Her legs threatened to give out. "There are others."

"All gifts granted by the Dark Lord for good service. Would you like to meet one?"

"No." She looked at him pleadingly. 'You must know your son. You know he is vicious. He isn't sound of mind.' Her voice was becoming panicked-she couldn't help it. "I fear for my life when I am with him. I can't live like this, I *can't*."

"The thing is, Miss Granger, you make my son happy. He's never been as serious about a girl as he is about you, and the lengths he went to acquire you only attest to that." He glanced

at her anxious face and gave her a small smile. "As long as you obey him there will be no threat to your health. I can tell he deeply cares for you though he may not show it."

"He cares for me in the way a collector cares for his collections," she said agitatedly. "There is no substance behind his obsession."

"Then I advise you to change that yourself," he said, and at her look of revulsion, added, "at least to keep yourself safe until you find... better conditions."

She looked dubious. Lucius put his hand on her shoulder.

"You needn't be so nervous. You make a wonderful addition to the Malfoy family."

"But I'm a Mudblood!" she cried, uttering the familiar slur as a last effort. "And I never wanted to be a part of this family!"

"Blood doesn't matter anymore, I assure you," he said. "If anything, your blood is just what the Malfoy line needs. Your talent, brains and beauty are highly spoken of and are equally matched to that of my son's, if not more so."

"That may be, but none of you seem to take into account the fact that your son has kidnapped another human being. I do not love your son, nor do I believe that what he feels for me is love. I am being treated like a possession; my freedom and my life have been taken from me. You *must* see how wrong this is!" She grasped the front of his robes in a supplicating manner. "Help me. *Please*."

Calmly, the older man pried her hands off his robes.

"I have already told you my stance on the matter, Hermione. Even if I wanted to help you, I believe there are numerous things preventing me from doing so." He looked pointedly at the ring on her finger. "Draco told me of all the enchantments he placed on the ring to keep you with him. There are many, and they cannot be removed easily. And only he can remove it, yes?" she nodded. "Even if I could, Miss Granger, even if I could, I would be betraying my son and I cannot find it in myself to do that when he has finally found himself a ray of sunshine in this darkness."

"But—"

"I am sorry," he said. "Truly, I am. But there is nothing I can do."

Hermione couldn't help it. The hope faded from her eyes and her face crumpled; a sound of despair tore itself from her throat and she fell against him, tears leaking from her eyes. She knew her actions were unsound yet there she was, seeking comfort and help from a known Death Eater who had tried attacking her years before and who was the father of the man who was ruining her life. Here she was, crying on his expensive robes like a child against her better judgment. Stupid of her, he was bound to throw her to the floor with a sneer on his face or he would hex her.

So she was stunned when she felt his arms wind around her, rubbing her back underneath her curls.

"I am sorry for what my son has done to you. I do not support the way he has gone about this but he is his own person and backed by the Dark Lord—you see why I cannot interfere? To do so would be to defy my own Master. I would be killed or tortured for speaking against this,

and my wife is too ill to manage on her own.” Hermione sniffed into his chest, almost choking on the strong scent of his cologne. It reminded her of her father, which only brought more tears.

Almost reluctantly, she pulled back, blushing.

“Why are you being kind to me?” she asked, accepting the handkerchief he offered her.

“Because you need it,” he said simply. “You are in a bad situation and it’s only going to get worse. I’ve heard much of your strength and compassion-do not lose it. It might be what saves you in the future.”

Hermione looked at him quizzically, but he said no more.

“Thank you,” she whispered, wiping the tears from her face before giving him an awkward, quick hug.

He looked slightly embarrassed, but patted her on the back with almost a pleased smile on his face.

“If you ever need a rest, you are always welcome here with Narcissa and I,” he said. “And speaking of my wife, I am sure she and Draco are wondering where you are.”

He took Hermione’s arm in his and together they began to walk down the hall.

Now if this isn’t odd, I don’t know what is, Hermione thought to herself. *Arm in arm with a Death Eater who has actually been kind to me.*

All the same, she felt an odd sense of comfort in his presence. Perhaps it was because some parts of him reminded her of her own father, or because he had acted as a friend to her, but as crazy as it would sound, she felt she could trust him.

What’s gotten into you, Hermione? She asked herself. *Have you gone mad? All this is getting to your head, what’s next?*

Almost as if he sensed her unease, Lucius gave her arm a soft squeeze, and gave her a small, reassuring smile.

“She has been quite keen to meet you for some time now,” he told her.

“I can’t imagine why,” Hermione muttered.

“Draco and I have told her all about you,” he said. “You’ll forgive me for saying this, but he is our only child, and she is glad to hear he is married, though she may not know how.”

Hermione kept silent until they reached Mrs. Malfoy’s room. The door was slightly ajar, Hermione made to enter but Lucius pulled her back from it.

“I won’t enter with you,” he said, “I’ve things to do. But remember what I told you.”

She nodded and he walked away quickly. She turned back to the door, but she stopped before she opened it. From where she stood she could see into the room where Malfoy sat beside the bed. The hand he held in his was extremely pale, paler than herself, and very, very thin. Malfoy’s head was bent low over it, and as she watched he pressed a kiss to it. Looking slightly toward the left, where the arm connected to the body on the grand bed. Most of it the

lady on the bed was obscured by the plush bed sheets but Hermione could make out her blonde, graying hair on the pillow. They were talking in low voices and she was startled at how gentle he sounded. His voice sounded like how her parents had once spoken to her, when she was still a little girl. He looked so *human*, it unnerved her, she had ceased to view him as one a while ago and yet here he was, *crying* at his mother's side.

She must be very ill if he's like this, she thought to herself. *Or could she be dying?*

She wasn't aware she had stepped in until the door creaked forward and Malfoy's head shot up to see her there. She froze, not knowing if she should flee or go in.

"Come in." His voice held no room for argument. It was back to the tone she was used to hearing; cold and demanding.

She crept through the doorway, each footstep sounding like a loud crash in her ears as she made her way to the bedside where Malfoy sat. Her eyes were glued to the woman lying in the bed, deathly pale, with some of the veins in her face easily visible and heavy bags underneath her dark eyes. Sweat beaded her forehead and her lips were dry and cracked. The woman smiled at her, and Hermione could see what was left of her beauty, of which she had heard much. Her dark eyes held warmth and Hermione found this comforted her, so she clasped her hands together and said a shaky "Hello, Mrs Malfoy."

"I might say the same to you," the woman said smilingly, though Hermione could see it took some effort for her to maintain the smile. "But please, call me Narcissa. May I call you Hermione?"

Hermione nodded, aware of Draco's intense gaze on her.

"I see my husband and son did not exaggerate your beauty," she said, and Hermione blushed. 'As well as your intelligence. I can see it in your eyes. I'm glad my son married a smart girl,' she said, smiling at Draco, who gave her a small smile in return, "he finally has someone who can keep up with him."

Hermione smiled woodenly.

"I had hoped to meet you earlier, of course," Narcissa admitted, looking a little sheepish. "If it wasn't for my condition perhaps we could have left the boys here and gone for a walk around the grounds."

"Mother—" began Draco.

"It's alright," she said, giving his hand a squeeze. "My health has been failing me for some time now-no seems to be able to find what's wrong with me, I'm afraid. I'm only happy I've lived long enough to see my son married and happy."

"Don't talk like that, Mother," Draco insisted. "Healer Worthington is coming to examine you in a few days. We'll find what's wrong and we'll make it better."

"Of course, darling," Narcissa said, smiling radiantly while cupping his cheek in her palm. Hermione knew she was only doing this to appease her son, she could tell the woman was dying. Narcissa knew it, too, and furthermore, Hermione knew that Narcissa knew that she knew. She could tell because after she had touched her son she had sent Hermione a fleeting glance, with what seemed to be a pleading look in her eyes, as if to say, *Please don't tell him*.

“We’ll take our leave now so you can rest, Mother,” Draco said, rising to his feet.

“I love you, darling,” she said softly, and he nodded, bending low to press a kiss to her forehead.

“We’ll visit again soon.”

“It was wonderful to meet you, Hermione” Narcissa told Hermione, extending one hand to Hermione. Hermione took it, surprised at the strength of the other woman as she squeezed it. ‘I hope next time we can talk more,’ she said. “There are so many things I’d like to tell you.”

“I’d like that,” Hermione said, surprised that she actually meant it.

They had just closed the door behind them when Lucius appeared, looking grim.

“We’re heading back, Father,” Draco said.

“I’m afraid that isn’t possible just now,” Lucius said. Hermione didn’t like the look in his eyes when he looked at her. There was a warning mixed with sympathy in their grey depths.

“What do you mean?” Draco asked.

“The Dark Lord has moved the date of the interrogation. He wants to see her now.”

22. Regret

Chapter Twenty-Two: Fear Me

Draco dragged her through the ugly halls, jerking roughly on her arms when she stumbled.

"I can walk fine on my own!" she snarled. He glanced at her but said nothing, his grip on her tightening so that she blinked back tears.

Lucius had gone ahead of them to inform the Dark Lord of their arrival. They had apparated to the Lestrangle house; a grand old place that must have once been the pride of the country side in which it resided.

Surely the darkness that bloomed inside it must have sucked it dry of its former beauty, Hermione thought absently as she looked around before Draco had all but pulled her arm off leading her into the house.

The house was full of dead plants. Dust piled in every corner and some walls held scorch marks and the like, leading Hermione to wonder how those had come to be. She hoped she would not have to face Bellatrix again-though she had only met her once during the battle at the Ministry, that had been enough for her to know the woman was lethal and absolutely insane. Her house reflected this aspect of her and it did nothing to ease Hermione's nerves as they neared their destination.

They reached a tall, heavy looking door and Draco reached for the doorknob. Hermione tensed, and sensing this, he turned to face her head on.

There was concern in his eyes as he searched her face.

"Don't do anything stupid," he said in a low voice. "Just do what he tells you, okay?"

She said nothing.

Frustrated, he took her face in his hands. "Listen to me, Hermione. I want you coming out of this place in one piece, do you understand?"

She looked him square in the eyes but kept her lips sealed.

"I mean it," he said angrily. "Disobey us and you will regret it."

She ignored him and stepped out of his reach towards the door. He let out an angry sigh before turning back and opening the door, pulling her along. This time she did not protest, she walked along quickly with her head held high.

She had expected a larger room. This one was dark-it held no windows and was poorly lit by some torches along the walls. The room was barren of furniture save for a few chairs and a table, the floor they walked on was the cleanest in the whole house; she could see her reflection as they made their way to the farthest end where a tall figure stood facing the wall.

Her heels clacked on the floor with each step and she longed to kick them off. How odd-her dressed to the nines in her first official meeting with Voldemort.

They came to a stop several paces away from the figure. Draco's hand fell from her arm and immediately she could feel the blood rush down to the rest of her arm, stinging madly.

"My Lord," he said, bowing. "You summoned for us."

"I summoned for the girl, Draco, but it is just as well that you are here," came the high, snakelike voice, his s's resounding around the cold room. Hermione fought the impulse to cringe.

He turned then, and Hermione locked her knees fiercely, fighting to stand straight as they buckled upon the shock of seeing his face-or what remained of it. Grey, with sickly looking veins spreading around his skull, his head seemed to gleam in the harsh light of the room, making his deformed red eyes shine like fresh blood. He had no nose, only two vertical slits for nostrils that resembled those of a snake's and a cruel slash for a mouth that widened to reveal sharp, feral looking teeth as he spoke.

"I must congratulate you, boy. You've found yourself a suitable trophy."

"Thank you, my Lord."

"You married her, I see."

"Yes, my Lord."

Hermione was a little satisfied to hear how Voldemort talked to Draco as if he were a child. Even if it was only this instance it felt good to know that though he was powerful, he still had to answer to and put up with someone worse.

"And have you enjoyed your gift?"

"Extremely, my Lord. Thank you."

Through her terror, Hermione wanted to point out that Voldemort had not had anything to do with her kidnapping, other than having allowed it.

"Such an angry spirit," Voldemort said as he looked at Hermione. "Look how she fights to keep calm."

Voldemort's eyes gleamed and he took some steps forward. His tattered black robes swished around him, revealing his bare, craggy feet. He began to walk in a circle around her, his long, grotesquely bony fingers held his wand lightly before his chest. Hermione kept herself completely still, not daring to look anywhere but straight ahead as he advanced towards her, his hideous eyes assessing her from every angle. She felt his gaze like the hot tip of a blade trailing over her skin, leaving gooseflesh in its wake. Several times he came close enough so that she felt his rancid breath wash over her and her flesh crawled but still she stayed frozen.

A shockingly cold, rough skinned hand lighted on her shoulders and travelled to her neck, brushing her skin with his sharp fingernails, making her suppress a shiver.

“At last we meet, Mudblood,” he hissed, coming to a stop before her. “I’ve heard much about you.”

Hermione didn’t reply, forcing her eyes not to waver from the spot she had chosen on the wall.

“Look at me when I speak to you,” he hissed. Malfoy tensed beside her, and she remembered his threats, but did not listen.

“Such a strong witch you’ve chosen, young Draco,” continued the living monstrosity standing before them, “she must not be easy to control.”

“I assure you, my Lord, soon she will bend to my will.”

Hermione clenched her jaw at Malfoy’s words, her tensed body quivering with rage. Her attention was brought back to the reptilian resembling man before her as he raised his hand to the hollow of her throat, taking her pulse. Hermione grimaced at his touch, knowing he could feel her racing heartbeat under his finger.

“I can almost *hear* your little heart pumping fear through you, witch,” he said, grinning nastily. ‘You stand before me with your chin high and your eyes cold and yet your heart runs wild under my finger. You’re just a silly little girl trying-and failing-to be brave. You are a kitten playing at a lioness.’ He flicked his hand and she exhaled sharply as his nail tore at her skin, leaving a small, weeping red gash. “Do not attempt to lie to me.”

He studied her blood on the tip of his finger before licking it with his red tongue. Hermione found herself slightly surprised to see that it wasn’t forked.

As if he had heard her thoughts the Dark Lord smiled, and gesturing towards the door he said, “Go visit your aunt, Draco. I wish to speak to the girl alone.”

Draco stiffened, but nodded and with a curt bow and one last worried look at Hermione, left the room. At his exit Hermione felt her control begin to slip. She had not anticipated this happening. She had thought Malfoy would be with her the entire time, and horrible as it sounded, she had felt safer when he was in the room with them. He was the one familiar thing in this nightmare, even if he was the one who had induced it.

The Dark Lord’s red eyes roamed over her body, head to toe, and Hermione couldn’t help the blood that rushed to her face. Her hands shook.

Be strong, be strong, be strong, she chanted in her mind.

She was too distracted to notice he was coming closer and closer until he was practically in her face. She startled but kept staring straight ahead, even when he grabbed her chin and tilted her face upwards to meet his hideous eyes.

“You do look quite ravishing,” he said in an amused tone. Fighting the impulse to retch, Hermione looked down at the ground, her arms at her sides. She could not fight him, but she sure as hell wasn’t going to play his little game.

“Tell me, little kitten,” he purred, “Were you a virgin when Draco took you?”

She fought to contain the blush that bloomed on her cheeks to no avail, it stung her cheeks with its intensity and to her further mortification a tear rolled down her cheek. His grip on her

chin slackened for a second, and before she knew what had happened he was in her mind and the events of that terrible night replayed in her head to her great distress.

Waking up disoriented. The mad dash through unfamiliar land. The capture. The rape. The morning after.

When it ended she found herself lying on the table, breathing heavily with a terrible pain in her head as the Dark Lord stood beside her.

“Y-You,” she gasped, unable to finish. *Bastard*, her mind shouted.

“She speaks!” he hissed, grinning. “And here I was thinking young Draco had torn out your tongue.”

She held her head in her hands, silently willing the horrible pain to go away.

“Such a fragile thing,” he said, watching her. “Almost broken after a bit of fucking.”

She cringed at his words and quickly eased herself off the table and away from him, kicking her shoes off in the process. He blocked her path to the door easily, the look of indifference on his face replaced by anger.

“We’re not done until I say we’re done,” he declared. With a wave of his wand Hermione felt herself flying backwards and landed hard back onto the table, her wrists and ankles bound magically to it.

“No!” she shouted, struggling against the restraints.

“You know what I’m after,” he said softly, holding his wand to her throat. “Tell me where Potter is.”

Hermione spat in his face, watching in satisfaction as he wiped it off angrily.

“Crucio!”

She couldn’t even scream. Her body jerked and writhed horribly on the table, her head thrown back against the hard wood as she struggled to breathe and empty her lungs at the same time. It felt like acid had been injected into her bloodstream, like her nerves were on fire. Her eyes rolled back into her head and dimly her brain registered a loud crack as her leg broke, bringing forth even more pain. Her body was on fire and at the same time it felt like a million nails were being drilled into her entire body. Her eyes burned with tears and her throat felt as though she had swallowed razor blades and her head was going to explode.

And then it was over.

It took her several seconds to remember how to breathe again— her body floundered on the table like a fish out of water before she began to suck in horribly loud, ragged breaths. She was sure she had cracked several of her ribs and her broken leg was currently numb, which couldn’t be a good sign but she didn’t care so long as the pain was gone momentarily. She could feel a migraine begin to form in her head, that horrible sensation that one feels before a seizure is prevalent in her mind.

A hand wrapped around her neck and she locked eyes with him. His eyes practically glowed with excitement and before she could stop herself she turned her head and vomited on

the space beside her. She heard his *tch* of disgust and before the smell reached her he had magicked it away before touching the tip of his wand to her sweaty forehead.

“Have you had enough, little kitten?” he asked in a sickeningly sweet voice. “Are you ready to tell me now? If not, I assure you that was only a sampler of my power.”

“Take your wand and stick it up your arse, you shite,” she snapped, and not a second later was she writhing under the force of the curse he bestowed on her. This time blood leaked out of her nose and he had delved into her head again for good measure, showing her once more the images of that night. He began to sift through her other memories too, and with enormous effort she managed to push him back out even though she was beginning to black out.

He stumbled backwards with the force of her resistance, eyes wide with shock and the curse ended just as swiftly, leaving her lying in a puddle of her own blood. He cleaned the mess impatiently, muttering an *Ennervate* just after her eyes had fluttered shut so that she awoke instantly, whimpering in the pain that still wracked her body.

She felt him prod into her mind again, just in time to throw up her defense, which wasn’t strong enough to hold him back for long, but enough to hide the information he was after. Upon the third try he broke through her weakened mind easily but she held on as he tore through her memories, failing to find what craved. He came back with an angry roar that made her ears pop and the very table she was on tremble but she kept herself sane on the thought that she had not failed Harry and Ron.

Would he *Crucio* her again? She hoped not. She was no Healer, but she knew enough that if he gave her one more round she wouldn’t make it back out. Either insanity or death would meet her at the end of his wand. She chanced a glance at him and knew he was thinking the same thing.

“It would be my utmost pleasure to use the *Cruciatus* on you again,” he said, “but I don’t think your husband would appreciate that, would he?”

With an eerie tenderness he brushed a tendril of hair from her forehead, noticing how she flinched away from the contact. “Are you willing to talk now? Or do I still have work to do?”

“I am not afraid of you,” she said through ground teeth.

He laughed then, a high, maniacal sound that pierced her ears.

“You will regret saying that. After this,” he said, pointing his wand at her dress which disintegrated, shortly followed by her undergarments, “you will be.”

Tick, tick, tick, tick

Draco tapped his foot impatiently, his fingers drumming rapidly on the surface of the armchair he sat on. His nerves were on edge, his body ached, his eyes darted from one point of the room to another quickly. The ticking of the clock on the wall beside him seemed to mock him.

Tick, tick, tick, tick

It had been an hour now. He had looked for Aunt Bella but she was nowhere to be found. There was no one else inside the dingy old house, it seemed. A trembling house elf had brought him some tea but it sat cold in its saucer. He had sat there with the cup to his lips for five minutes before he set it back down with a *click*, not having taken one sip. He had heard screams— choked, agonized screams that left him breathless and fighting the impulse to run in there and drag her away, back to his Manor where she would be safe. But doing so would have made him a traitor. He was the one who had offered the girl for interrogation in the first place long ago and to take her away now would make him and his parents open targets, as well as her.

So he sat there, stewing in worry for his wife. He got up and paced around the room, occasionally taking a deep breath to regain control of himself. The clock seemed to grow louder with each passing minute.

Tick, tick, tick, tick

Her screams started again, and he tensed. They were worse now.

Draco closed his eyes and exhaled shakily.

Another hour passed before he was finally summoned by the elf to come to the drawing room where the Dark Lord waited for him.

He very badly wanted to run there. Walking was simply not fast enough for him at that moment. Though he always went at a fast stride it was not enough, he was good at running and he knew his long legs would not fail him but he forced himself to walk.

He pushed past the doors and strode into the room, but not before making sure his face was devoid of all emotion.

“My Lord?”

The Lord in question stood with his back to the door. To his side was the table on which Hermione’s crumpled form lay. His stomach plunged to his feet and for a moment he believed her to be dead until he caught sight of the slow rise and fall of her chest, indicating she was very much alive. He actually went weak with relief.

“Did she-?”

“No.”

Draco nodded. He hadn’t expected her to.

The Dark Lord waved his hand and she stood, sliding off the table. She picked her shoes off the floor, gathering them in her arms and then wiped the blood from underneath her nose. There were spots of blood on her dress and bruises scattered around her arms and legs. Her face was a mess of blood and dried tears, and he found his anger rising, though a voice in the back of his mind hissed how hypocritical he was.

He was the one who got her into this in the first place. He had basically signed her up and tied a big fat ribbon on her neck and then left her at this monster’s doorstep like a gift basket.

He was broken out of his self-deprecating thoughts as she walked rigidly towards him with glazed eyes, tottering on each step for a brief second before catching her balance and continuing on her way. It was disconcerting to see, like someone walking on ice with high heels on. At last, she reached him, and looped her arm through his, swaying on her feet. Caught off guard by this, Draco almost didn't hear the Dark Lord say, "I'll send for her again sometime soon."

The moment they arrived back at his Manor the Dark Lord's Imperius ended and she collapsed on the floor as though the bones from her legs had been removed.

"Hermione? Hermione!" he knelt down beside her frantically, checking to see if she had any serious injuries. Aside from the heavy bruising she seemed fine, but that didn't explain why she couldn't walk and why she was currently trying to scratch her own skin off. He placed his hand on her arm and she panicked, heaving herself away from him with all the strength she had left so that he ended up on all fours looking stricken.

"DON'T TOUCH ME!" she screamed, tears streaming down her bloodied face. The realization of what the Dark Lord had done to her crashed into him, knocking the breath out of him. Of course, he had known there was a possibility it was going to happen but he had selfishly deluded himself into thinking it wouldn't happen. And there it was, the evidence before his eyes. He watched dumbly as she continued scratching at her arms and legs; he could see the red high on her thighs. There was so much red.

He picked himself up and lifted her up into his arms, ignoring her pained whimpers and pleas to be left alone. Her voice was raspy and hoarse, she had no screams left. He entered the house quickly and calling for Bogg to run a bath, set straight for their bedroom. Her clothing was discarded and burned immediately-he had been surprised she had not protested until he looked down at her and realized she had passed out. He had placed her into the tub as gently as he could, not caring that he was getting soaked in the process, and proceeded to wash her as thoroughly and as gently as he could. She remained unconscious through the ordeal, for which he was glad. The blood slid away with the soap and he surveyed the damage with blurred eyes before healing it.

Once he was done she was lifted out and dried, dressed into a comfortable pyjama set and set straight to the bed. Stripping off his sodden clothes, he joined her, holding her battered body gently and pressing kisses into her damp hair, repeatedly muttering "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

23. Only If For A Night

I do not own these characters or anything else from the Potterverse. EXCEPT IN MY DREAMS.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Only If For A Night

*“Sky, don’t let the sun go,
I’m not ready for the darkness,
Swear upon a heartless soul”*
—Not Alone, Sara Bareilles

It was hard to tell when she’d woken. The first thing she was aware of was that she was lying in a bed with someone’s arms around her and then her lungs lost control. She breathed rapidly; small, shallow little breaths as her body began to tremble. She looked down at the arms encircling her-pale, muscular limbs that were rather different from the ones she was thinking of, but that didn’t lessen her fear.

A small whine escaped from her mouth as she felt his arms tighten around her, holding her body closer to his broad chest. Her nose was level with his lips and her lips barely grazed his chin, her arms were folded protectively over her midsection. Whatever heat that had been in her body seemed to abandon her in that instant-she could feel the warmth coming from him but it only made her feel worse. With difficulty (since his arms prevented much movement) she extracted her arms and pushed at his chest, a desperate moan tore from her throat and she pushed harder when he didn’t budge, a scream clawing its way up her throat.

Having woken by that point, Draco loosed his hold on her but brought her closer to him, moving his hand to cup the back of her head, his other arm wound around her more securely. A series of protesting noises escaped from her but she was too weak to fight him; her arms were practically locked to her sides, he had thrown his leg over both of hers and though she thrashed around as best as she could, it did nothing to shake him off.

“Shhhh,” he murmured into her hair, rubbing her side as she continued her struggles. “Ssshhh.”

When it became clear he had no intention of harming her she began to calm down and her pulse began to slow. Though she had stopped moving altogether she had done her best to bring her body as far away from his as possible, eliminating any contact excepting where he held his hands but he scooted closer anyhow. Holding her more softly now, he pressed feather-light kisses on her face, his hands now spread on her cold cheeks, brushing errant curls away from her visage.

Blinking instinctually from the close proximity; she caught brief glimpses of the expressions on his face as they appeared. Almost like a series of snapshots: worry, regret, desire, and fear. There was another, guarded carefully behind his light eyes, but her clever mind felt it as he kissed her. It was something that made the hairs on her body stand on end when its name appeared in her mind in a wave of doubt, fear, and shock. Unwilling to face it, she pushed it to the recesses of her mind, dismissing it as a trick of her mind, and pressed her lips together. Unsuspecting of her thoughts, he continued his ministrations. Happy relief that she had settled down pulsed through him, slowing his movements and he took his time exploring the delicate beauty of her face with his lips.

It had been the longest night of his life; though he had given her a Dreamless Sleep potion and had Bogg heal her thoroughly, he had stayed up watching her, holding her until the sun rose and then at last he'd allowed his lids to close in submission to his exhaustion. He didn't know how long she had slept, nor he for that matter, but he didn't care.

His lips had not stopped their exploration of her soft skin. They dragged over delicate cheekbones and tasted the salty sweetness of the curve of her cheek, his tongue darted out every now and then to steal a taste of her. It wasn't enough-he was starting to think he'd never be able to get enough of her-a thought that frightened him more than he would admit.

His eyes flicked up to hers and studied her carefully as his mouth attached to the skin just underneath her jaw. Her eyes were shut-at first glance he thought she had fallen asleep but his tongue flicked out again and her eyes tightened, eyebrows drawing closer together and she breathed in the smallest whisper of air. Stiffly she gave the slightest shake of her head; her fists, which he'd trapped into immobility, clenched and opened nervously. Her nose rubbed against his cheek with the movement, and understanding her silent plea, he placed a soft, reassuring kiss onto her lips.

"I won't," he assured her quietly, palms resting on the sides of her face. His thumbs stroked her wet cheeks gently, occasionally pausing to brush at her lips, which still trembled. His eyes rose and caught hers, which she'd finally opened though the strain was still there, and his breath caught upon reading the trauma in them.

What did that bastard do to you? For a second he considered delving into her memories again to see what exactly had happened, but on second thought, did he really want to know? And it wouldn't make things any better for her, either. For the first time Draco felt helpless, and he hated it. What had he done? Even if he hadn't planned on this at all he'd played a part and now he was paying for it. Hermione shuddered in his arms and he looked into her face, contrite.

"I won't hurt you," he repeated. She looked away from him, and he knew what she was thinking.

At least not tonight.

She was still watching him, distrust and unease plain in her face even as he kept *sshhhing* and humming softly into her ears to help her relax. This went on for several minutes-his hands remained cupping her cheeks, their faces only a whisper apart. Still absorbed in her pain, she was too far gone to notice, or even care. All she knew was that she was in pain and would do anything to forget, even if it meant to endure his embrace and suffocating kisses and his whispers that it was all going to be okay.

As the minutes passed her eyes fell heavy once more and her body began to accept his warmth; she began to relax into him somewhat reluctantly. He had closed the gap between their mouths and had pressed his to hers in a kiss that was so gentle a few tears slid from her eyes and coursed down to puddle in the gaps between his fingers.

“I’m sorry,” he breathed into her soft lips as her eyes fluttered closed. “I’m so sorry.”

Hours later they awoke together, blinking away the clouded filmy layer over their eyes. Draco watched her carefully as he stretched; rubbing the soreness from his arms, which had fallen asleep.

“Are you still in pain?” he asked, feeling her forehead to gauge her temperature.

She ignored him, staring at nothing in particular. *Why should you care?* Her face seemed to say.

“What did he do?” he asked quietly. Once again she did not respond. But this time she met his eyes with a challenging expression, as if to say, *Oh, you **know***. His expression hardened and he leaned in closer.

“Did he use a Contraceptive charm?”

The blood drained from her face and her body stiffened.

Swearing loudly, he snatched his wand from the bedside table and brought it over her hips, muttering a rapid incantation. She felt a tingling sensation in her lower abdomen and watched as her lower body glowed white. Unfamiliar with what this meant, she looked to him with dread on her face only to relax when she saw his body slump with relief. He pushed his hair back from his face and tossed his wand back onto the table, muttering something she couldn’t hear. The response was enough for her to understand and immensely relieved, she let out a breath she hadn’t known she’d been holding.

It hadn’t occurred to her that Vol— that *he* might have wanted her to bear his child— but for what purpose? The thought made her skin crawl. It was bad enough that Malfoy here had all but promised her that she would bear his children—the thought of which made her unbearably angry and sick.

Movement in the corner of her eye caught her attention and she looked towards her captor, who had shrugged on some casual clothing and now sat on the edge of the bed with a tray of food, which he carefully pushed towards her. She stared at it, frowning when he ordered her to eat something. It had been hours since she had last eaten—she should have felt hungry, but she didn’t. At the moment he was eating a green apple, his sharp teeth having no trouble cutting into the flesh of the fruit, whose juice gleamed on his reddened lips.

Ignoring the throbbing ache that pounded through her body, she raised herself from the bed and shuffled to the bathroom, feeling his eyes on her all the while. Closing the door behind her, she made to lock it only to find there was no lock on the door. *Of course*. She brushed her teeth rigorously, only once she had made sure that the toothbrush was not his. This one was new, but just to be certain that he hadn’t just got himself a new one she looked through the cabinet behind the mirror and found his own there.

And speaking of the mirror. She had refused to look directly at her reflection the entire time, choosing to look only at her teeth as she brushed them. She did not want to look into the mirror and see what disgusting sight awaited her there. But in the end her curiosity won, just as it usually did, and bracing herself, she looked.

She didn't know what she had been expecting, but it hadn't been this. She looked exactly the same.

How long have I been gone? She wondered. *A week, at least?*

There were her eyes, brown and apprehensive. Her mouth-swollen and red from his attentions to them, but still normal. Her thoughts briefly turned to that kiss he'd given her just before she'd fallen asleep again. So sweet and soft, it had transported her back to her last night with Harry, and had brought such an intense sorrow and fear in her that she had begun to cry again. How she missed him—just thinking about him made her heart feel horribly hollow and bleak.

Turning her gaze back to the mirror, she assessed herself, gazing solemnly into her reflection's eyes, unsure of what to look for. She had been here for a week at most, and she felt she had gone through enough to mark a permanent physical change in her, but there was nothing. She wasn't quite sure if this should have made her happy or not.

Her gaze trailed down to the pyjamas she wore, which, to her horror, turned out to be Draco's. The only reason she could tell was that they were simply too large for her. The shoulders almost hung off her own, sliding down to reveal skin she no longer felt comfortable in. The bottoms were much too long as well, and unable to bear the feeling of wearing his clothing, she tore them off as fast as she could and lunged for the shower, adjusting it to be as hot as she could manage.

Once she stepped into the tub and closed the shower door behind her the steam rolled around her and fogged the sliding glass doors, cocooning her in its comforting haze. The hot water seared her skin, making her nerves scream, but she ignored the pain and focused solely on the warmth as she began to scrub viciously at her skin until she felt it might slough off. The hot water enveloped her in its mist and she let it, releasing the loofah with an involuntary twitch of her hand, watching the suds slide down her body. In the span of a second her knees buckled and she collapsed with a bang, pressing her palms to her open mouth to silence the horrible cries that came from it.

She had never cried like this before. Not when Malfoy had first forced himself onto her, not when she had discovered that Harry and Ron had left her, not even when she had seen her beloved Headmaster's lifeless body crumpled on the ground. She had cried hard each time, but what she was doing now she wasn't sure if it could be classified as crying, much less be compared to those other times.

Her breathing was beyond her control, almost like earlier that day, but only so much worse. Breaths came out faster and harder than she could replace them in her lungs— as a result it felt as though there was an invisible pair of hands inside her chest wrapped around her lungs; squeezing and twisting and then letting go quickly before beginning their torture again until she thought her heart might burst. Dark eyes burned with the intensity of the tears she shed unknowingly, thinking them to be the drops from the shower head hanging above.

Everything was slipping-her resolve and control over herself began to crumble down, and hard as she tried to hold herself together, wrapping her arms around her body in a self-embrace and bending her knees to meet her chest, it was still happening and nothing she did, nothing, could prevent it. Heavy, sodden curls plastered themselves to her boiling skin, dripping rivers of shower water that sluiced down her shaking body.

And the noises she was letting out... if someone had recorded them and then played them for her to hear several weeks before, she would have sworn that those noises were made by something not human, and would have been astounded to learn that she was the source.

Years of torment had led to this. How, exactly? Where did it all go wrong? This must have been her fault-she had let her guard down enough to let herself be caught and now had landed into something worse than a nightmare. Trapped with a madman, married to a monster. How was she going to escape?

Her hands gripped the thick wet strands of her hair and pulled-hard, harder. There was no pain, only the torrent of emotions inside her that threatened to pull her entirely apart, and that was pain enough for her. No longer did she feel the heat of the water or the porcelain around her, all she felt was the agony and despair that clawed away inside her.

A hand lighted on her bare back and she didn't feel it nor its companion who wrapped around her waist and brought her backwards into something hard and cold. She only realized she had company when those hands gently pried her own open to release her long hair. Her screams stopped at once and in the sudden silence they reverberated around the room, making his breath catch in his throat. Her eyes opened and cleared and she realized with a start that the shower had been turned off. She wanted it back on. She wanted to feel her skin burn. Weakly, she began to raise her arm to grab the knob when his hands returned to her hair and she froze.

Slowly, carefully, he gathered her sodden tresses from her shoulders and her back and softer still, brushed the strands away from her face, pulling it all gently back into one long stream that flowed down her back. Her heart had stilled with fear and with dark eyes fearfully widened she waited his next move, uncertain of what it might be. Would he strangle her, perhaps? Give it a hard yank like he had once told her he'd always longed to do? Each possibility that came to her was violent and frightening, which was why when he began to twist her hair in his hands and squeeze the water from it she was so hugely surprised.

Water ran down her back and along the curve of her bottom and she wondered at the gentleness of his actions, which both calmed and disturbed her. She kept completely still and silent until he finished detangling the wet strands and pushed himself out of the tub. She didn't dare watch as he moved around the room. Would he leave her alone now?

A sudden cold blast of air hit her, and remembering that she was naked, she hid her breasts with her hands and lowered her head, ears glowing red. Something fuzzy rubbed against her elbow and she jumped, leaning away from it until she had a proper look at it and realized it was a towel wrapped around Malfoy's hips. He stood above her, watching with those clear eyes she was beginning to realize she could never escape from.

Her heart pounded wildly under his stare, a sickening *glug glug, glug glug*, noise that made her think she could actually see her heart trying to beat its way out of her chest. His hands were around her middle now and feeling his grip tighten, she began to quake once more. Was

he angry? Would he punish her? He couldn't possibly want to use her now, could he? A strangled whimper escaped her lips as she tried to turn her head to see if he was angry or not, but as he was directly behind her it was difficult. He shushed her quietly and with one easy, fluid motion brought her up into his arms and out of the room, wrapped in a towel as soft and as dark as the one he wore. Hermione hated it, him carrying her, even if she wasn't stable enough to walk at that time. Saying nothing else, he lowered her onto the bed; she immediately made to move off and away but he hardened his stare and she stopped at once, not wanting to ruin this suddenly peaceful turn to his behavior, even though it made her suspicious and wary.

Reaching into one of the drawers on the dresser, he pulled out a pair of boxers and pulled off his towel, much to her chagrin. She turned her head away, cheeks angrily flushed as he slid the boxers on. He seemed to have no qualms about being nude in front of her, but instead of leering at her or even making any attempt at forcing her, he simply sat on the edge of the bed beside her, where she had sat up against the headboard, clutching the towel to herself.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. She shook her head, and flinched involuntarily when he let out a harsh sigh.

"You need to eat."

She shook her head again, unwillingly meeting his eyes when he began to say something else. He watched her intently, alarmed that she wasn't speaking at all. But though no sound came from her lips her face said everything she wanted to say.

I'm not hungry... just leave me alone...

"I can't do that," he said softly. He stretched his arm out, wincing when she recoiled, but he brushed her hair softly with his hand, watching as his magic dried it back into her lovely soft curls. Pulling back, he watched as she felt her hair and visibly relaxed, though still watching him with suspicious eyes. He patted a pile of clothing on the bed and her surprised brown eyes took in the expensive fabrics, obviously not having noticed them before.

"Unless you'd like to be naked for the rest of the day I suggest you put this on, if you can," he said. "If you're still feeling sore I can bring you some Pepperup potions," he continued, as she pulled the pile of clothing apart to inspect each item individually. He could see the indignation and annoyance she felt written clearly in her face at the thought of him picking out what she should wear. This, he knew, would incite her to dress herself, no matter how much pain she was in. Her cheeks turned pink at seeing the lacy lingerie at the bottom of the pile and her jaw clenched angrily, but still she said nothing.

"I'll be downstairs when you've finished," he said. "You will join me in the library." She looked livid at his ordering her, but turned away and kept mute as he left the room.

Once the door was closed behind him, Hermione eyed the clothing angrily before sighing in resignation and pulling it on carelessly. Though she simply detested the fact that he was choosing what she should wear, it was better than the towel or worse, nothing at all. The lingerie, though flimsy and embarrassingly revealing, still covered what she needed hidden though she still felt entirely uncomfortable. The gown was a different story.

She wasn't lacking in monetary means, but this dress alone would have emptied her Gringotts account. Made of a rich black velvet, it clung to her body and flared out at her

knees into a beautiful train embroidered with a fine crystal pattern that made her jaw slacken. The neckline was modest, for which she was thankful, and the sleeves were short and fitted-in fact, the whole thing fit her as if it were made for her, which though she didn't want to believe, was most likely true. Though when Malfoy had had the time to take her measurements she didn't know. She wondered if this and the dress she'd worn to the Malfoy Manor were the only dresses he'd had made for her-though it seemed unlikely she fervently hoped so. The thought was deeply troubling by itself, but when paired with the fact that he'd had that window and the library made just to her taste it was horrifying. If she had had the energy or the willpower to analyze this further she would have, but for now she was exhausted and didn't feel like it.

He had left her no shoes, which she hadn't expected, and didn't care for anyhow. She felt absolutely ridiculous in the dress; she would have felt infinitely better in a rucksack, or Dobby's pillowcase, even. What was the point in dressing her up like this, anyway? Just for kicks? He was wasting his money. With this final thought she slipped out of his room, walking awkwardly in the stiff fabric. He had wanted her to meet him downstairs but she had other ideas. It was past time to find a way out.

He said the wards prevented me from leaving the land, she thought, but surely I could leave the Manor if I wanted to? I could hide out somewhere in that forest and sneak back in when he comes out to look for me. Perhaps Floo to Malfoy Manor and call the Ministry? Or from there I could Floo to the Burrow?

This plan was a jumbled mess, but it felt wrong to not have one.

That being said, she turned on her heel and began to walk swiftly away from the direction she had been ordered to go. She was looking for another set of stairs to lead her to the first floor so she wouldn't have any chance of running into Malfoy. The halls were dark, which didn't surprise her—they had slept through most of the day, anyway.

A crease formed between her brows. She'd forgotten about that. His behavior that day was so entirely different from what she had known it to be that she didn't quite know how to take it. He had held her closely and stroked her skin, humming a song she vaguely recognized into her ear to calm her down, and then with everything that happened afterwards, she found herself quite at odds. So far the Malfoy she had known was violent and dangerous, not afraid to use physical force or manipulation to achieve his means.

Except...

There had been that one instance in the previous year, before he had killed Dumbledore, when she had been sick with the flu and he had actually taken care of her. He'd held her hair back from her face and had given her water after she'd expelled the contents of her stomach, and when the fever had gripped her he had stayed by her side. Of course, she'd ordered him to leave beforehand and still didn't agree with the fact that he'd slept with her. Stupidly, she'd let her guard down in the haze of the fever and thinking he was Harry, had allowed him into her bed.

It doesn't mean anything, does it? She asked herself worriedly. *It couldn't.*

It would be so much easier to see him as the monster he was if he didn't have moments like these where he was actually *human*. But did she want him to be horrible to her all the

time?

Gods, no.

She simply needed to get away and then see about having him taken down.

At last finding a set of stairs leading downwards which she nearly fell going down them in all her haste, bunching up the train of the gown by her hips so she wouldn't trip over it. The stairway led to what she assumed to be the back of the Manor. Flattening herself against the wall, she inched along the corridor and entered what was obviously the kitchen. A quick glance around assured there was no one inside, and spotting a clear glass door at the far end, she dashed towards it. The door led outside, it was plain to see; in the far distance she could see the sun setting on the horizon where the lavender fields lay. Before she could even wrench it open, her wrist was caught in a fierce grip and she was roughly turned around to face a pair of stoic ocean-blue eyes.

"Going somewhere?"

Obviously, her eyes read. Sod off.

He saw through her attempt at bravery easily. Her eyes, though angry, were widened a fraction more than necessary so more white showed, displaying her fear for any to see. His eyes swept downwards and admired the way the dress complimented her figure before he stepped back and tugged her alongside him back to where he'd been waiting in the sitting room.

"You can't leave the Manor," he said. "You'd need my permission to do so."

There it was again, that anger that flared up inside her-instant and terrifying in its lust for his blood, for his fading pulse in her fist. How dare he think he could control her like this, govern what she could and couldn't do? She was no better than a household pet.

They had reached the library by then, he steered her to a long, cushy sofa and pushed her down gently into it, ignoring her glares. He sat on the other end, bringing her feet up to his lap so that she had to sit sideways with her back to the armrest.

There was tea and cakes on a little table before them; behind those was more food. She eyed it all stonily before turning her gaze back onto him.

"I could summon you a book, if you feel like reading," he offered. She shook her head.

"Then at least eat *something*."

His voice had not been harsh but the tone conveyed force enough to compel her into grabbing the nearest cake and cram it into her mouth with murder on her mind.

He smirked and patted her foot. "Good girl."

The smirk was instantly concealed under bits of the chewed up cake she'd spat at him. Furious, he wiped it off hurriedly, one hand gripped her foot just as he felt it retreat from his lap, his other hand automatically lashed out and struck at the girl, who'd been struggling to free her foot from his hold. She cried out and fell to the floor in a loud rustle of fabric, her arm slammed against the table on her way down.

Draco rose, magicking the rest of the mess she'd made away with a twitch of his hand. She was on her side, brown curls obscured half her face, but he got the full scale of the hatred in her glare as she pressed her hand to her flaming cheek, leaning on her elbow.

"I am not an animal." Her voice was strained, no doubt from being unused all day.

He crouched down by her, placing his elbows on his knees. "You may not be, darling, but you're begging me to treat you like one." Her mouth parted in rage, but before she could reply he reached out and covered her mouth with his palm.

"Don't start, Hermione. You've had a rough couple of days and you will not make it worse for yourself. And if you bite me you will regret it, I promise you." He withdrew his hand, and watched as she lowered her hand from her cheek, revealing the mark he'd left. His palm cupped her cheek and he leaned in to crush her mouth to his. In a small act of defiance she curled her lips into her mouth, tucking them behind her teeth so that his lips pressed only on the crease of her mouth. This did nothing to deter him; his hand rose up between them to grip at her jaw, his fingers pushing her cheeks in with enough force so that with a loud gasp her mouth opened and her lips appeared, reddened and wet.

"Don't ever deny me," he snarled, and resumed his plundering of her mouth, his tongue sweeping in her moist little cavern to claim all that he hadn't before. Her hands tried-and failed to push him away, the ring on her hand prevented her from protecting herself. A sudden tingling sensation on her cheek distracted her and she wrenched away at last; turning her head to the side so his lips dragged on her cheek and ended up at her ear. His other hand was still on her injured cheek and she pushed it away, pressing on it gingerly to find he had healed it.

He watched her do so, breathing heavily, but he made no move to kiss her again. Instead, he stood and brushed off his clothes, then sat back on the sofa, opening a large volume.

She remained on the floor, frightened and uncertain of what to do next. More than anything she wanted in that moment to escape the room, escape the manor itself, but that wasn't possible. Not with him there.

Seeing him so collected and calm after what had just happened rattled her quite deeply. There was something truly wrong with him, with his mind, for him to act like this was all normal. This man, she was certain, was almost entirely different from the one she'd known back in Hogwarts. What had changed? He was just as insane as before, if not more so, but what was different? What exactly had happened to him after he'd left Hogwarts?

There were no restraints here, she realized as she stood back up, and regarded him shakily. No rules to abide, no reason to hide his true self. As awful as he'd been months ago she realized that had barely been the tip of the iceberg-he'd held back. He stared back at her, expressionless, and they remained that way before she realized she'd been waiting for him to apologize.

"Will you sit?" he finally asked.

Her voice was as stiff as her posture. "No."

"Do you want something else to eat?" He gestured to the tray of cakes, which she'd upset when she'd fallen and now lay in crumbles.

"No."

Malfoy looked impatient. "I'm sorry I hit you, is that what you want?" He stood, and approached her, but Hermione backed away and he stopped.

"You're not sorry at all," she breathed. "You think you were justified."

"Little bird, as long as you defy me I'll be forced to chastise you."

"I'll defy you as long as you keep me here," she snapped, clenching her fists. "Save yourself the trouble and let me go."

Frowning, Malfoy strode forward and grabbed her by the shoulders. "The sooner you accept this the easier it will be for you."

"How?" she challenged him. "How will it be easy?"

He reached up to stroke her cheek. "There'll be less pain, Hermione. Or is that what you want?"

"All you've ever done is inflict pain, even when you think you don't mean it," she said, and curiously, he paled. "You can't possibly keep someone like this and expect everything will go smoothly, especially with our history..." she shook her head, trying to pull away.

"It can," he said, "if you cooperate."

Hermione tried slapping him, already knowing the outcome. She missed, and the blow went into the air. Draco didn't bother dodging.

"I'll cooperate when Merlin rises from his grave," she hissed.

Draco narrowed his eyes and gripped her harder. Hermione struggled to free herself.

"You'll have time to reconsider," he said coldly, and still holding her arm, began to lead her out of the room and up the stairs. Hermione knew where they were headed immediately, feeling strangely calm. The isolation room was cold when he locked her inside, but empty and void of any other human presence and that was how she preferred it. Hermione stripped off the dress and flung it towards the door. Throwing it into fire would have been a better option but she didn't care to fill the room with smoke, as since she had no way of using magic here Malfoy would have to clean it up, and perhaps change his mind about leaving her alone, and she didn't want that. As long as he left her alone she could get along fairly well, the only disadvantage being that now she had no other chance to explore the manor and try to formulate an escape plan.

There was a black silk robe hung up in the bathroom. Hermione hated it on sight. What a stupid thing to have; how would this keep her warm? She pulled it on anyway, not liking how exposed she felt wearing only the lingerie set she'd been provided. She would have liked to take those off too but needed the protection, however flimsy. The bed had been bare but when she exited the bathroom sheets had been added, and to her relief, a thick blanket as well. Hermione grabbed it and wrapped it around herself, sitting down at the fire just as she'd done last time, Malfoy's words ringing through her head.

You'll have time to reconsider.

No, she thought, frowning. *I'd never, even if I was here for the rest of my life, and I promise you, I won't be.*

Other words, spoken by someone slightly more vile than Draco, began pushing their way to the front of her mind. Memories she never wanted to see again. Hermione shut her eyes, pressed her head to her knees, and willed them away. She never wanted to face those images again or she would truly begin to break. A mantra formed immediately and she found herself sticking to it, using all her might to push those memories away somewhere in her head where she could never find them again, and for good measure added an imaginary barrier, thicker than the walls of Hogwarts itself. If she wanted to get out then she could not waste any time focusing on that, and she didn't plan to. There was only so much she could deal with at one time.

It didn't happen, it didn't happen, she repeated to herself. *Nothing. It **didn't** happen.*

24. Plans

Nothing from the Potterverse belongs to me.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Plans

The two wizards stared down at the bubbling cauldron with varying expressions of unease. Inside the cauldron was a sickly-looking grey mixture; lumpy and emitting a faint, pungent odor, they very much would rather let it congeal there than consume it, if they didn't need it so badly. The tall redhead cleared his throat twice, wincing at the potion's smell, which had taken up residence in his mouth and refused to leave.

"This is mad," he said, shaking his head, and turned back to sit on his cot.

"It's all we've got," Harry replied, turning to look at his best friend.

His rumpled clothing was filthy and torn, as if he had worn those same articles for the past week straight. There was dried mud caked around the bottoms of his jeans and a nasty tear along one knee, and his shirt was so wrinkled and dingy Harry was sure his mother would have set it to flames if she could see them then. There were stains on his chest and stomach; brown and black, and Harry was the only other person who knew those red stains had once been a dark red. Contrary to the appalling state of his clothing, however, Ron's face was clean and still glowed faintly pink from the energy he'd expended in their practice-duel earlier. He'd rinsed his hair and face and the end of Harry's mouth had lifted in a small smile when the ginger had emerged from the bathroom with his overgrown hair tied into a tiny ponytail at the base of his skull. If he grew more muscles and pierced his ears, he would almost completely resemble his older brother, Bill.

Although they had figured out another Horcrux was very likely to be in Bellatrix's vault in Gringott's, they had reluctantly decided to wait as long as possible to retrieve that one. That plan was still in the works (meaning they had nothing), and Harry knew that if they did it now, once Voldemort would hear of it he would know exactly what they were up to. Right now they had the element of surprise, and he planned to keep it that way.

The Polyjuice potion would be ready in two days' time, and so would they. He was burning with anticipation and nervousness, staring at the cauldron relentlessly without being aware of it until Ron would call his attention. They'd gathered from Kreacher and Mundungus that Umbridge had the locket, and had thrown this plan together to infiltrate the Ministry to retrieve it. There was no guarantee it would work, but it was all they had-for now, it all weighed on whether they had brewed the potion correctly. While they had still been staying at Grimmauld Place, they had spent several days hunting around for the ingredients they needed to make the concoction. Many of the basic things had been in Hermione's purse, which he had taken from her room before he left. This saved them more time and trouble, and while he felt guilty over stealing her bag, he would make it up to her. Even though she wasn't there, she was still extremely helpful. For the more complicated ingredients they had had to

risk a few stealth trips to Diagon Alley under the protection of the Invisibility Cloak. Ron had suggested they steal the ingredients since they very well couldn't go up and buy it themselves, and leave the money for the stuff somewhere only the shop owners could find it without being too obvious. However, the only money they had was the bit of Muggle money and assorted Wizard currency Hermione had packed just in case, and neither of them felt comfortable using that without her permission. In the end, they had no other choice but to test their skills and use Imperio on unsuspecting shoppers, have them buy what they needed, and they would pick up the supplies and then slip the money (which Harry would pay Hermione back later) into the wizard's pocket while he stood in a foggy haze. Afterwards they ordered the poor fellow to forget the encounter and go on his way, and they apparated away quickly, back to their lonely tent.

They had had to vacate Grimmauld place after a few weeks-the number of Death Eaters standing watch outside had grown considerably and they ultimately decided it would only be a matter of time before they found a way to break in, or worse, one of the two mucked up and let down the wards. Under the darkness of the night they had slipped out, the cloak over their bodies and their miniaturized things tucked safely in their pockets. Casting the strongest Muffliatos they could, they'd apparated away successfully, and as far as they knew, the Death Eaters still thought they were inside.

And so by some miracle so far everything had gone smoothly-except for Ron continually splinching himself, which they'd frantically healed with the essence of Dittany. They practiced dueling and tried hexes and spells they found in the books they'd brought with them, and kept watch on the potion. It was not perfect as Hermione's had been in Second year, but it was good enough and that was enough for them.

If Hermione were here, we might just be able to pull it off without any trouble, Harry thought glumly.

But she wasn't-they continually felt her absence like a severely dealt physical blow. The tent was too quiet without her, too cheerless. They had to remind themselves this was their doing and they had done it to keep her safe.

Harry mumbled something about going for a walk and had exited the tent before Ron even had time to process his words.

The cool, dry air refreshed him and stung his cheeks, but didn't do much for his worried mind. Snow crunched under his feet and he took care not to slip on any ice or go past the wards. Green eyes surveyed the frosted land sprawled before him, the cloudless, colourless sky. On their visits to Diagon Alley he'd tried to find any copy of the Daily Prophet he could get his hands on, not caring if they were old or new as long as he has some clue as to the current events; if those he loved were not in the obituaries. Each time Ron had stopped him.

"It's better not to know," he'd said in a quiet voice. "Let's just end this and then we can go home."

Each time Harry had listened to his best friend and gave up the search although he wanted-*needed*, to know. Although what Ron said did make sense-he had to focus on the Horcruxes and take them down before he could get to Voldemort-the sooner, the better. It wouldn't help anyone to drown in misery and wonder who was alive, who had been killed. And though Ron wouldn't talk about it, Harry knew he was worried about his family, who was so entangled in

both the Order and the Ministry. Harry worried too, so much that it hurt, but he couldn't let it consume him, no matter how guilty he felt about the ones he had left behind.

It was especially hard when those posters stared back at him from nearly every place they went to; his own eyes seemingly accusing him of abandoning Hermione, of failing Dumbledore, among other things. The words, 'Undesirable No. 1' "blinked at him in that bold print, almost imprinting themselves into his brain. It was unsettling and even a little frightening to see them—they reminded him of Sirius's posters in Third year. They were very much like the WANTED signs he'd seen on cartoons as a child on the rare occasion he had been allowed to watch the telly with Dudley, though his cousin always sat as far away from him as the room would allow.

If Uncle Vernon could see him now... "Just like the rest of your lot, then," he'd hiss, chins wobbling, "No-good, hocus-pocusing criminals."

Underneath the ransom and the reasons for his wanted capture were two small blurbs of information bearing descriptions and information on Ron and Hermione, who were "under suspicion of being in hiding or travelling with Potter." He had been surprised to see Hermione's name until logic kicked in and he remembered that was what they wanted, what they had planned. If they thought she and Ron were with him then they would leave the Weaselys, the Grangers, and Hogwarts alone, or at least not bother them as much.

It was hard to keep her off his mind when she had already been hiding there for so long and only recently discovered.

Some mornings he'd wake with her laugh ringing in his ears, growing faint even as he tried to bring it back, or the ghost of her kiss fading from his lips. When they ate he could almost hear her admonish Ron for his amusing eating habits or himself for eating so little. When they'd sneak food from well-stocked homes, he could feel her beside him, fretting over whether it was the right thing to do, and while it *probably* wasn't, neither he or Ron knew what was edible in the forests they stayed in, and even if they did, they'd have no idea how to prepare it for consumption, which was undoubtedly something Hermione would know, he was sure.

When they sat at the scratched up table and gathered everything they knew to plan their next move he could see her, palms flat on the table as she'd pore over maps and the books she'd stacked inside her purse-books he daredn't open because they still smelled like her. He talked to her in his mind, asked her questions she could not answer because she was not there.

All this he kept from his best friend. Part of him would have liked to, but he felt it too private, along with the fact that he thought Ron had enough to worry about.

It was getting colder. The sun was sinking below the line of naked trees so that slivers of its weakening light transformed his solemn face into a mosaic of light and shadows.

He hoped she was okay. It would have been too dangerous for her to go back to Hogwarts with Malfoy on the loose. She would be safe with the Weaselys, and perhaps if she was not able to directly help, he knew she would find a way. He wished he was there with her now, even if he knew it wasn't possible. He had to end this first. He would end the war and go home.

And if you die? A small voice piped up in the back of his mind.

Harry closed his eyes, feeling the warmth of the sun slip from his skin as it slipped beyond the horizon.

If I've got to die, I'll die, he thought. I'll make sure to kill Malfoy and Voldemort first.

Whatever happens, I'll make sure she is safe.

It was curious-how often had she read accounts where someone had lost their spirits just as she was beginning to lose her own? In books and tv dramas she'd watched back home, documentaries and interviews showed cases almost similar to her own where people became ghosts of their former selves or even an entirely different person. At first she had been quite alarmed to find that being in the presence of books brought her no semblance of the comfort it once did. She had spent hours in the library, breathing in the smell, feeling the worn spines of the many books, all to feel no spark like she used to in her past life, for that was what she called it now-Life Before Malfoy). Everything was starting to feel surreal to her, like it was a dream she had woken up inside and couldn't find a way out.

Hermione trailed the pads of her fingers over the glass, blinking when the cold seeped into her skin. Coloured light tinted her skin, turning her into a mess of purples and blues and reds and yellows and greens. If she closed her eyes, she could still see them behind her lids.

The cold raised gooseflesh along her arms, making the fine hairs stand on end. She wished this gown had sleeves, and briefly entertained the thought of asking him for a jumper, but decided not to. It had been several weeks now since her meeting Voldemort. Malfoy had kept up his gentle demeanor most of the time; cradling her in his arms and pressing kisses to whatever skin he could reach, giving her books and flowers and all sorts of strange little trinkets, like the jade elephant that sat beside her now on the window seat, acquired from a brief trip to Asia when he was twelve. She had pretended to be interested in it; turning it over in her fingers and rubbing its glossy surface, but the moment he left the room she had dropped it into the space beside her.

Truly, she would have liked nothing more than to throw it at the wall, or at his head, but that would make him angry, and she didn't want that. If she could avoid it, she did, but try as he might to keep his temper under control, there were times when he flared into a rage at something she might say or do; the way she'd turn away from him when he held her, how she sat like a statue at the dinner table and barely ate; how she refused his attentions and offered him none as well. He rarely beat her-and to him, beating consisted of slapping her around a bit, pulling on her hair, and nothing more. She had seen and heard of much worse, and was grateful this was as far as he got. If he would go further, she never wanted to find out, so she tried not to set him off, though it was still difficult to tell when he was becoming angry. No, he did not like to beat her, but he had a tendency to take his frustrations out on her when they were in bed.

He had avoided having sex with her for at least a week after her torture in his aunt's house. He still held her close and kissed her hungrily as his hands wandered over her body; she would feel his penis hardening and remain rigid in his arms until he calmed and his breathing slowed down, but he never entered her. She supposed she should have known it was never going to last, but it still came as a horrible surprise when she awoke one morning to find

herself lying on his desk, all papers pushed to the floor, and him already pushing into her, growling loudly when she screamed and tried pushing him away to no effect.

She had not been ready, neither in mind nor body and unable to speak through her pain, had clutched his arms in a pleading gesture for him to stop-a gesture which he wildly misunderstood as one for passion, and only drove on with more force. Afterwards she had stumbled in her haste to get off the desk and had fallen onto her knees, lashing out at him when he came forward to help her up and as punishment he'd forced her to take him in her mouth, saying all sorts of things that nearly made her vomit, and in that moment she really wanted to just so he would never have her do that again. She'd never done that before, not even with Harry. Fear had overtaken her-she didn't know what to do so she froze in shock. Her first instinct had been to bite, to spit him out, but under the ring's spell she could not harm him, and his grip on her hair held her in place before him so she could barely move until he started barking orders and thrusting into her mouth. Tears of humiliation had blurred her vision and she fled the room the moment he had let her go after he'd finished and made her swallow his hot semen. One second she'd been rising up from the floor on shaking legs and the next she was making herself vomit into the toilet, cleaning herself with the damp cloths Bog offered her.

She'd barely spoken before but since then not once had she made a sound. He didn't seem to mind all that much, really-or if he did, he hid it well. He would simply take it out on her later at night, when they were in bed, or really, whenever he felt like it. She felt each day was like a prolonged game of cat-and-mouse, she had to switch from place to place and hide wherever she could so he would leave her alone. Only she had the disadvantage of not knowing his Manor very well so she lost quite frequently. Sometimes he would haul her all the way back to his bedroom or he would take her wherever she had been hiding, tearing open her expensive clothing and ignoring her shielding hands as he forced himself into her. More often than not this would happen several times a day so most of the time she would be nude before the afternoon. It was too bothersome to try to hold those ridiculous gowns together to cover her completely, but she abhorred being naked around him so she had once made the mistake of wearing one of his shirts. He had gone wild when he had found her, and she learned never to do that again.

She hated her situation, but above all else she hated that she was *learning*.

How to act around him, how not to set him off, how not to bring sex on his mind (which was futile), how to survive-these were lessons she never thought she'd learn and yet here she was, taking mental notes and taking care not to repeat her mistakes so things would hopefully get better, though it wasn't likely.

None of her learning had done her any good that day, however. Draco had gone off for some reason, and she had ghosted behind him to try to get out of the room only for him to gently push her back in with a wicked smile and lock it behind him as he left, laughing quietly at her agitated fists smacking against the door to no effect.

Left with nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, Hermione had sat down at the window seat facing the rest of the room. She had initially wanted to wait for his return so he would not sneak up on her, but facing the bed and its rumpled sheets forced her to turn her head away in shame and disgust. Even though he forced her to share the bed with him each night she always referred to it as 'his' bed. This was the bed in which he trapped her every night in his

arms, forcing himself into her or simply lying beside her and touching her in ways he had no right to do. Would things ever go her way, she would cut the mattress open, entangle him in the springs and set it to flames.

She wasn't sure how long she had been sitting there-time had become a foreign concept to her now. The days and nights blurred together, and she didn't even know when exactly which was which since all the windows were covered and there were no clocks inside the place, and she had spent hours looking for at least *one*. She had tried going back to the glass door in the kitchen only to find it obscured just as the windows were, to her frustration. The Manor was by no means poorly lit, but she found herself hating the artificial lights. This window-her window, as he called it, was the only one that was not covered.

Fat lot of good that does me, she thought bitterly, flexing her finger so that her nail scratched against the glass.

The beams of light that came through this window were weak and contained barely any warmth-they could have been from either the sun or the moon, it was too difficult to tell. Hermione hated these weak beams with a passion. She wanted, *no-needed* to feel the sun; its heat on her skin. She had to see the moon's mysterious beauty again. When was the last time she had been out in the sun? She wasn't quite sure. She frowned. Was it still December? Or had they already crossed over to a new year? The thought frightened her.

I wonder what's happening outside, she wondered. *Have Harry and Ron found any more Horcruxes? Have they found a way to destroy them? Do they know I've been captured?*

She hated asking herself that last question. No doubt the Weaselys knew. Were they looking for her, right now? Or did they think she was with Harry and Ron? They probably did. And even if they were looking for her, it would take them a long time to find her, if they ever would.

Which is why it's up to you to escape, she told herself firmly. *You can't rely on anyone else right now; they've all got bigger fish to fry.*

The only question was how she would do it. Loathe as she was to admit it, Malfoy had outsmarted her with the ring and the wards. He was taking great care not to let her see or hear any mention of what was happening outside the walls she lived in, and she had to admit he was doing a fantastic job since she had absolutely no clue. But that was about to end. The changes in her were scaring her into motion and she was determined not to let him win.

He arrived much later than he had intended, flicking the melting snow from his shoulders and shaking it out of his hair. Blaise had insisted that he stay a while longer once their business was done and they had spent some time talking about nothing in particular until it was suddenly night time and he had been invited for dinner. He had sent Minky, one of Blaise's elves to have Bogg take Hermione her dinner, since she wouldn't be able to go to the dining room. At the thought of his wife still in their room, he quickened his pace and entered the room silently, almost giddy with the prospect of startling her.

His eyes fell on her instantly, asleep on the window seat, arms wrapped about herself in an endeavor to keep herself warm. She was curled up against the pane, her forehead touching the

cool glass and her long hair fanned out like a shawl around her shoulders. Draco undressed rapidly, leaving his boxers on and went over to the window, lifting the sleeping witch into his arms and then deposited her onto the bed, crawling in to face her front. With a flick of his hand she was in nothing but her undergarments and the gown back in the closet. He'd expected her to wake at the sudden sensation of being nearly nude but she slept on, totally oblivious.

A frown pulled at her eyebrows and pouted her lips. She did that so often now, he wondered if he would ever see her smile or hear her genuine laugh again. Had she always frowned in her sleep? He thought back to the occasions he'd snuck into her bed before he'd left Hogwarts. No, she had slept with a peaceful expression, brows smooth and lips hinting at a smile.

What demons plague your mind? I, perhaps?

"What do you dream of, darling?" he whispered after he had pulled the sheets up around them. Suddenly it occurred to him to try and delve into her mind and see what her unconsciousness had stewed up for her.

He drew back, shaking his head. It had sounded like a good idea but he felt it was something he would regret later, and when it came to her, he would regret nothing. Not that he was weak, because he wasn't, but he supposed her dreams were very private to her and he didn't particularly care what she dreamt of anyhow. Perhaps she dreamt of the wonder duo, Potter and Weasley. Did she revisit old memories in her sleep? Or did concern for them gnaw at her mind?

He hoped they were miserable, wherever they were.

Although, he mused, if not for them, my plan would not have succeeded. I'd never had got my bride. He smiled fondly at the woman, who was unaware of his presence.

I ought to send them flowers.

A sardonic smile graced his lips and he slung one arm over her hip to pull her closer. The action roused Hermione, whose eyes opened and cleared instantly (to an eerie effect) and she watched him with no expression on her face. She seemed to be waiting for something.

"Go back to sleep," he murmured, pulling the covers up higher to drape over her shoulders. For once she didn't protest, and eager to return to the blissful nothingness of her unconscious, she curled back into herself and slipped back into sleep instantly, as if she had never woken.

25. Mark Me

I don't own Harry Potter.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Mark Me

"Something's not right," were the first words that erupted out of his mouth the second he stepped into the small, cozy office. The principal occupant of the room was seated at the desk placed by the window, looked up sharply at this sudden intrusion of the stillness of her mind.

"What are you referring to, Longbottom?" she asked, peering at him through her spectacles.

"To Hermione not returning to Hogwarts, Professor."

Professor McGonagall sighed. "Not this again..." she muttered, rubbing at her temples wearily as the young man continued to speak.

"Something's happened to her, professor, I can feel it." Neville moved agitatedly around the room, dismissing the chair she had offered him seconds prior. His charming, handsome face was twisted with an urgent worry for his friend, dark circles around his eyes were evidence to his many sleepless nights and his eyes held a desperate look to them, for as much as everyone had been surprised and dismayed at the Head Girl's delayed return, the rumours and chatter had died away within days. Not having seen her on the Hogwarts express on their way out of Hogwarts he had been worried, but wrote it off as her simply keeping a low profile and hurrying off before anyone else. He didn't blame her-if he'd had as horrible a year as she he'd have done the same. Except, on the way back to Hogwarts he'd actively looked through each compartment on that train and had fired questions at everyone he came across only to find no sign of the brunette whatsoever. He alone was left to agonize and wonder what had happened to her, whether she had really gone off with Harry and Ron as he had suspected they would, or if what they had all feared concerning a certain Slytherin had already taken place.

The first few days he had been on edge and troubled, but kept quiet since it was not uncommon to come back a bit late from the holiday. Perhaps, he told himself, I'm being silly. But the days kept passing and she did not appear, and neither did Ginny. By then he'd already been to see his head of house at least three times— each meeting as unsuccessful as the last since she had much to deal with.

"Mr. Longbottom, I know how worried you must be about Miss Granger but a gut feeling isn't enough to confirm that something bad has happened to her," she said.

"Professor, please-she promised me she would come back after the break and you know she's not the type to break a promise," he insisted.

"A letter of inquiry has been sent to her parents, Longbottom. Until we receive a reply we must assume that she is well and will come back."

"You know that's not true, Professor," Neville argued quietly. "Ginny, Harry, and Ron haven't come back either. What if they've all been captured?"

"Miss Weasley has been accounted for. Her parents did not think it safe for her to return to Hogwarts for the remainder of the year."

"What about Harry, Ron and Hermione, then?" he asked impatiently, feeling relief at knowing at least one of them was okay, although it was fleeting.

"Mr. Longbottom, I assure you we are doing all we can to find them," said the Professor. "The Order is also looking into it but aside from that there isn't much we can do while we're here. I'm sure the three of them are together somewhere plotting some assuredly dangerous way to take down You-Know-Who." Neville frowned at her tone, she sounded like she was trying to convince herself instead of him.

Neville sat in the chair at last and lowered his voice.

"What about Malfoy, Professor?"

The older woman's mouth tightened, and the lines on her face became more pronounced. "What of him?"

"Professor, I don't think Hermione's with Harry and Ron. I think Malfoy's captured her somehow."

There it was. The truth they'd been denying themselves. Neville had thought it would have made him feel better to say it, but it only made the ball of dread inside him grow larger.

"Can you prove it?"

"No," he said reluctantly, "but there's no other reason why she would just disappear like that, and we both know what happened between her and Malfoy."

McGonagall's gaze sharpened on him. "They told you?" He nodded. At this she seemed to deflate, and appeared more worn than mere seconds ago.

"I've suspected it myself," she said quietly, looking down at her desk, "but I've been waiting for confirmation."

"Confirmation?" Neville repeated.

She handed him a bit of parchment and he read it quickly. He was unfamiliar with the writing but even if he had known it he wouldn't have been able to recognize it anyway. The words were scrawled so messily it took him three tries to understand what it said. The signature was shaky and blotted but he clearly read the name Molly Weasley. When he finally did, his face drained of what little colour it had left, and he raised his eyes to meet the Professor's grave stare.

"It's true, then," he said dumbly. "He's got her."

"We cannot be entirely certain," she said, 'anything might have happened, but we are taking that into consideration.' She looked away. "However, what little evidence we have

points to Malfoy.”

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?” he demanded angrily.

“I was under the impression that it was not your business, nor was I aware you were privy to this information,” she said, taking the note back.

“What are we going to do?” He had launched himself out of the chair again, began pacing rapidly around the room. “Have the Malfoys been questioned? Has their house been searched? Have any signs been put up?”

“This note was delivered today,” she responded “so not much has been done. A specialized team will be assembled to search for them and the Malfoys will be questioned as soon as we have permission from the Ministry, but I am doubtful anything helpful will turn up,” her tone was sour.

“That’s not enough!” Neville said impatiently. “We have to find her now!”

“I’ll thank you not to raise your voice,” she snapped. “Everything that can be done will be done and we will find her, or more likely she will find us.”

“But—”

“No buts,” she interjected. “There’s a Transfiguration exam you should be studying for right now, and I’ve many other things to deal with but finding Ms Granger is a priority. I will keep you updated when there is progress to talk about.’ Her eyes took in Neville’s poor state for a second before she opened her mouth again and said, “Make sure to go to the Hospital Wing on your way back and ask Poppy for some Dreamless Sleep Potion.”

“...Yes, Professor,” said Neville quietly, and she tried to send him her version of a reassuring smile before he turned and walked out of the room.

Neville had just reached the portrait of the Fat Lady when he remembered about the potion. For a brief moment he considered forgoing the offer but his whole body seemed to burn from exhaustion and he didn’t want another nightmare of Hermione lying on a cold floor in a dark room, bloodied and battered, so he turned on his heel and set course for the Hospital Wing, taking care not to walk too loudly. If Filch found him he’d be too keen to haul him to Snape’s office for whatever petty little reason he could think of. Though he still had forty minutes until curfew he was sure Filch was just dying to dole out some punishment and tonight he was determined it wouldn’t be him.

Since Professor Dumbledore’s murder (he dare not think of the man that killed him, it would only rouse his fury) McGonagall had been immediately made the new Headmistress, a position he knew she had never craved but felt obligated to fulfill in honor and respect for her fallen friend and mentor.

Everyone had got accustomed to her—she was just and strict, but not overly so. She kept Peeves in check and even the Slytherins were a little wary of invoking her wrath, which was not equal to Dumbledore’s (which he very rarely showed) but frightening enough in its own special brand that was purely Minerva McGonagall. The year had started well and though they all thought she could never truly replace the wide gap left by her predecessor, she was doing well, and the students grew loyal to her.

Neville knew they all (himself, included) hoped that the worst was over and now was the time for things to begin anew, but that was a vain, hopeless wish reserved for the stupidest of the first years.

Each morning the headlines on the Daily Prophet was worse than the last, shouting about the latest explosion of natural disaster in the Muggle World they all knew had been done by their kind, whole families or sole wizards and witches went missing in large numbers-(less than half of them would ever be found). He watched as his companions withdrew into themselves with the fear of themselves being next. Nobody wanted to admit it. When he brought up the dark events, he was met with hushed tones and averted eyes. If he pressed on the subject hostile stares would match his own. They knew Voldemort was gaining power, but they were afraid to even mention it.

“There’s a war coming,” Harry had told him weeks before he’d left. “We need to be ready.”

This, he promised himself, they would be. He was going to help Harry bring Voldemort down and then go see his Mum and Dad so they could see he had turned out just like them; a hero. He would help them find Hermione and everyone would be okay. So he had gathered what was left of the DA and they began to train as best as they could without Harry. Things seemed to be going well; they were all making exponential progress, until the day the Ministry came.

That day had started out normal, just like any other until it was dinner and suddenly the doors opened and the Minister strode up in front of the surprised students and an irate Headmistress to announce that Severus Snape would be their new Headmaster. The great room had vibrated with the heaviest silence he had ever known for exactly seven seconds until the students (minus some of the Slytherins) had risen into a great uproar over the Minister, who continued his speech woodenly, over McGonagall’s protests that the Ministry had no power over the decision, which were promptly ignored.

A sharp clack emitted from his mouth as his teeth snapped together in anger upon remembering the smug smirk on Snape’s face as he took McGonagall’s vacated seat at the center of the staff table.

He doesn’t deserve to be Headmaster, Neville thought angrily. *He doesn’t deserve anything.*

Despite the protests of a good number of the students, nothing could be done. The Ministry had a tighter grip on the school now and under the incredulous eyes of those who inhabited the castle, people who never should have been allowed to step foot in it did just that. Professor McGonagall went back to her small little office beside the Gryffindor tower and things took an ultimate turn for the worse inside Hogwarts. He’d been tortured so many times in the Defense Against the Dark Arts class, under Snape’s hateful glare no less under the guise of being an example to the other students, both for the curses they were taught and for the times when he couldn’t hold his tongue and burst into loud arguments with the new professors.

The first time had been the worst— he’d been dazed with pain and hate and shock, wiping the blood from his face with trembling arms as he tried to navigate his way to the Hospital Wing when he bumped into Luna. He’d expected her to ramble on about those Gibflitters or

whatever they were called as she had the last time they had talked, but for days he'd failed to notice that a little of her dreamy aura had disappeared and she could focus on the smallest, most important details with startling clarity which she did then, immediately honing in on his wounds and thrusting her warm hand in his before pulling him to the Room of Requirement. There had been no DA meeting scheduled for that week so the room was empty except for the two of them as she pulled a small crocheted purse slung around her shoulder to her lap and retrieved her wand which he realized she had not tucked behind her ear as she often did. She had healed his cuts and cleaned his face and they had spent a good hour or two talking about what was going on inside and outside of the castle. Luna knew from her father that the Ministry had indeed been infiltrated, which confirmed Neville's suspicions. Neville had been the only one Harry had trusted enough to tell what he was up to, although in the vaguest of terms. And though Luna didn't ask once where Harry was or what he was doing outside of Hogwarts, Neville had the feeling she knew.

He had burned to tell her how worried he was about Hermione; how that hard little ball inside of him was filled with near certainty that Malfoy had captured her at last. Horrible, haunting images of what was probably happening to his closest friend seared over his vision repeatedly and he was repeatedly seized by a surge of hatred so cold he could barely keep himself from breaking out of the castle to find her, wherever that monster was keeping her and bring her back to where she would be safe from Draco Malfoy. But in the end, he said nothing, forcing a pained smile onto his face as Luna pressed his hand and left with a shy smile.

By the time Neville reached his bed he was so tired he didn't bother changing out of his robes. The bottle was clutched in his hand and he downed it in one gulp, licking the sweet potion from his lips and then allowed his body to go slack and collapse onto his bed. The headache that had been forming since he had left McGonagall's office disappeared instantly and he loosened his tie hurriedly as he felt the subtle clutches of sleep grab hold of him.

Malfoy had been gone all morning. Hermione had woken to a rare moment of happiness upon finding he was neither in the bed, nor anywhere else in the Manor that morning. It wasn't quite like the kind of happiness she had known before she had been taken, but it was better than the constant hatred and uselessness she felt-as long as she had some time without his draining presence she could manage to be as content as the situation allowed. The pile of clothing that had been left for her to wear had been snatched up and thrown on quickly, before he could walk back in and decide she would have no need of clothing that day. As barbaric as it sounded, it was something he did often, and she hated it with all her being.

The first time had been the most humiliating-right after he'd finished using her Hermione had grabbed what clothing he hadn't ruined and began to put it on only for him to spell it all away with a lazy wave of his hand. She still wasn't speaking then, but had not needed to ask to know he got some sort of perverse pleasure in seeing his cum dribbling down her legs, clinging to her skin. It disgusted her, so she rid herself of it as best as she could, and thinking that was that, left the room. Only once again she was faced with the dilemma of having to walk around with nothing on. Asking him was out of the question-he'd only laugh. But she tried other ways: tearing down the drapes for a makeshift robe had seemed a good idea until she tried and realized they were much too heavy to do anything with, and besides that they

simply would not come down, no matter how hard she pulled. The towels were missing from the bathroom, and the blanket she remembered seeing in the library was gone as well. She suspected all this was his doing. He'd caught her twice more that day before bed, and though he hadn't raped her she had been subject to ceaseless petting and stroking, which filled her with rage.

Now she was on her own for at least a few more hours, and she found herself relaxing just a little as she made her way to his study. This was not the first time he had been summoned away. Hermione wasn't exactly sure if he had been summoned or not but what other reason could there be? He hardly ever left the stupid Manor anyhow, only to visit Blaise or his parents but never so early, which led her to believe this was Voldemort's doing. This piqued her interest very much. In sixth year she had discovered he was not a Death Eater, and had got the impression he didn't care to be one. In her first days at the Manor after her capture she had stolen looks at his arms only to find them as bare and pale as they had been months before. So if he didn't want to be a Death Eater, why was he working with Voldemort? Why had he brought her to be interrogated if he wanted no part of the war? What business could Malfoy have with Voldemort?

So many questions... will I ever get the answers? Hermione glanced up and down the hall before entering his study.

The desk was littered with sheafs of parchment and scraps of notes, quills dripping ink lay scattered about, staining the papers. Having shared a living space with him for most of the year before had given her the knowledge that he was a creature of tidiness very much like her, the proof itself was in his neat, bold script and the way everything else in his study was well taken care of. So looking at the cluttered desk, she wondered what could have prompted him to leave it in such a state. A thought struck her, and quickly, she began to rifle through the stacks of papers.

It took a moment, but at last she found what she was looking for. A copy of the Daily Prophet. She tugged it from the pile and scanned the headline greedily with hopeful eyes, only to frown when the words on the pages began to rearrange themselves into utter gibberish and the photographs were blacked out instantly before her eyes before she could even get a glimpse of what they held. In a second the paper became completely unreadable. She couldn't determine how old the issue was, and even more frustratingly, could not determine anything about the state of the Wizarding World and Harry and Ron, *if* there was anything about them in it.

Sighing, she tossed it back onto his desk, cursing him over and over. Thinking quickly, Hermione tried to read the other notes lying on the desk for something, *anything* that would help her find an answer to the million questions running through her mind, but they had all been wiped clear. Cursing, she turned them over and tried summoning her magic to help her, but as soon as she felt it stir inside her a stronger force pushed it back so suddenly she felt dizzy and faint.

The ring flashed hot on her hand, and she brought her hand up to glare at it. She could see herself reflected in the facets of the emerald. The multiple copies of herself were frowning.

He did this to me. Clever bastard.

The emerald pulsed a green light, almost imperceptible but in the dimness of the study it was as clear as a fire in the colourless Forbidden Forest. Biting her lip, she tried again, with effort, to summon her magic but just as before it was stamped down somewhere deep inside her where she had no access to it. Again she tried, and the force that held her magic back felt stronger than before, leaving her a little light headed. The powerlessness radiated through her and she let her hand drop back to her side, the ring still pulsing happily away on her finger.

She could feel her magic inside her, flickering, waiting. Unattainable.

A growl lashed out from her throat and overwhelmed with anger, Hermione knocked several piles of paper off the desk, falling silent as they mixed and flew up into the air. One sliced at the skin on her arm but Hermione ignored it, too focused in her thoughts.

He must have known she would come in here and take a look around. Massaging her temples, Hermione turned to leave the room and shouted out in alarm when someone whirled her back around and pressed her into the desk, covering her mouth with their hand.

"It's only me, pet," he whispered into her ear, and she jerked her head away.

"Get away from me," she snapped.

"I missed you too," he said, laughing. His hands settled on her hips. "Were you looking for something, little bird?"

Hermione didn't reply.

"I can only guess," he said, smiling widely. "Were you looking for news on your friends?"

She twisted out of his grip and made for the exit, but Draco caught her around the wrist and pulled her back, anchored her to the desk by pressing her into it.

"Play nice, sweetheart. I didn't mean any harm by the question."

She stayed silent and refused to look him in the eye. Draco settled his hands softly around her shoulders. She shuddered.

"What are you thinking?"

"What I'd be doing if I wasn't here," she said truthfully. She still would not face him.

"We both know the answer to that," he replied, a shadow crossing over his eyes. "You'd be with your lover and Weasley. Squatting somewhere whilst fancying you could save the world. You'd be looking after them like you always have, as if you were their mother but it's only Potter that you'd part your legs for at night."

Knowing it wouldn't work but fueled by rage, she moved to slap him but he caught her in time.

"It's the truth, sweetheart," he said coldly, letting her go. "You know it as well as I do. You're much better out here with me than out who know where with two idiots who don't know what they're doing."

"Don't *ever* speak for me," she snarled. "I'd much rather be lost and starved with them than trapped here with you!"

“Be thankful I am looking after you,” he said softly. “You’ve never made the smartest choices when with them.”

“Nothing I do is for you. I don’t base my decisions on whether they will please you or not. I don’t need or want you looking after me.”

“You don’t,” he agreed. Hermione faltered, surprised. Draco took her hands into his, pressed them against his chest. “But I will continue to because I care about you.”

Angrily, she pulled her hands away.

“Take that as you will,” he continued, “willing or not, you’ll always have me.”

“Are you trying to be romantic?” she sneered.

Draco caught her face between her palms and kissed her in full, treasuring the feel of her lips against his. She turned away so he resorted to nuzzling his face into the juncture between her shoulder and neck, lapping at her skin with his tongue. Quickly, he lifted her and sat her onto the desk, pushing himself between her legs. She supported herself on her elbows, trying to scoot backwards and away but it wasn’t possible, his large hands had wrapped themselves around her ankles and pulled hard. Her body slid on the desk, scattering the rest of the papers to the floor, her hips collided with his and he sucked in a breath, eyelids fluttering. She shut her eyes tightly. He was beginning to harden, pressing himself against her core with slow, erotic movements that made her tremble; whether it was in fear or desire she didn’t want to know.

“I’m so glad you’re mine,” he moaned, hands trailing up her bare legs, pushing her skirt up to her middle.

Hermione pushed his hands away. “No.”

And then he was cradling her face in his hands, peppering her cheeks and forehead with sweet kisses until his lips finally found hers in a passionate kiss.

It felt like he was trying to suck her soul out of her mouth, just like a Dementor would do, only this was more intimate, more humiliating. When he released her mouth she was gasping for breath, almost choking on her own saliva.

Her large, beautiful brown eyes entranced him-with the light shining into them and the way she looked up at him, they looked almost golden, with small flecks of green dancing around her pupils. They held misery and pain, fear and a deep, deep sadness that pulled at his heart. There was something else, something that he couldn’t quite put his finger on and it bothered him immensely. Tightening his hold on her hips, he leaned forward so that she bent backwards, watching him wearily.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her eyes widening when he placed his fingers on her lips and frowned, his other hand tilting her head up even further into the light. Her breathing was ragged; she didn’t know what he was doing and the look he was giving her, while it didn’t scare her, unsettled her greatly.

There was something so fragile in her eyes, so delicate, that it almost hurt him to see it. He could see the remnants of the girl she used to be before he had destroyed her. The girl who had smiled brightly at all who walked past, whose ambition and goals were higher and closer

than anyone else's'. The girl who held stars and fire in her eyes, who was afraid of nothing and bowed to no one. The girl he had stolen and deflowered.

And yet...

"You're so innocent," he said, almost awestruck, his hands cupping her face as though it were made of the finest crystal. He muttered something and dimly, Hermione registered the sound of the drapes on the window nearest to them being opened. At once, she felt the warmth of the sun on her skin, the heat seeping down into her body and she shivered, her shoulders dropping. The room turned golden with the newfound addition of light and nearly blinded her with the strength of the small beam of light. She slammed her eyes shut and saw a violent red-orange behind her eyelids.

The moment lasted only a few seconds, but to her it felt an eternity. When she opened her eyes again she was surprised to find him before her, watching her with a slight smile on his lips. Hermione blinked the fuzziness lent from the sun from her eyes. She had forgotten about him.

She said nothing. There was fascination and it seemed impossible, but she was almost certain there was remorse in his eyes.

"After all I've done," he remarked, "and you're still pure."

They both stood in the sunlight now, in the wide beam of weakening light that streamed in from his open window, it warmed their skin and illuminated their hair and eyes; hers were a liquid gold and his were a shocking shade of blue as he stared at her hard like she was a puzzle he was quite determined to solve.

"How?" she wasn't quite sure he was talking to her anymore. His fingers traced over her lips, brushing her cheeks before settling down around her neck.

Mouth free, Hermione cleared her throat. This was getting tiresome and she hated when he stared at her.

She sighed impatiently, hoping he would get the hint and let her go but if he got it he ignored it, choosing instead to wrap his arms around her and crush her to him, almost purring at how her soft breasts yielded deliciously to his hard chest. His hands went down to cup at her bottom and her hands rose up to his chest, bracing herself as he groped her hard, almost lifting her on her toes.

"My precious little bird," he murmured, groping even harder so that her breasts rubbed against him and he moaned. She bristled at the possessive pronoun, but said nothing, merely taking her hands away from his defined chest.

"I want you," he spoke into her neck. She shivered at how his voice vibrated on her neck, tickling her uncomfortably. His hands were on the small of her back now, pressing her intimately against his crotch.

His large, monstrous hands were in her hair, pulling and pulling so that her head tilted back, exposing the white column of her throat to his eager mouth. He attacked her throat, kissing hungrily, dragging his teeth down to her collarbones and nipping hard enough to make her yelp.

"It almost frightens me sometimes," he murmured, 'I own you, and yet there is still so much about you that fascinates me— *I want to possess you, consume you*, I want to breathe you in, to have you submit to my every whim and desire. I want to take you for days on end, to fill you again and *again* and **again** so that you can't even twitch your thigh without knowing I was there, so that those pretty pussy lips will be sore from my touch, from my mouth,' his voice had gone even deeper with lust, it rumbled low in his chest, vibrating against her flesh. "I can never get enough of you."

His lips trailed back up, and began to suck on her flesh, hard enough so that when he pulled back she was struggling for breath and clutching at her neck. A feral grin shaped his mouth, his teeth glinting in the light. Hermione instantly attempted to hop off the desk, but he gripped her around the waist and held her to him once more.

"I'm not done with you yet, precious," he hissed. Before Hermione knew what had happened she felt herself being pushed down onto the top of the desk with enough force to leave her breathless. Pain shot down her spine and she groaned, pushing against Draco's chest even as he pinned her down with his strong body. His mouth returned to her neck with renewed vigor, his tongue reaching out to taste the nectar of her skin, to stake his claim on her.

He bit down hard where her neck connected with her shoulder and she let out a muffled scream into his chest, which grew louder still as he sank his teeth further, breaking into her tender flesh. He moaned as her body writhed beneath his; he could feel her slamming her palms down onto the desktop in a nonverbal plea for him to stop, but he couldn't. With a shove he pushed his hips into hers, pressing her down so that she could not retreat. Her hands were on his shoulders now, pressing and pushing to no avail, and he found himself wishing she would bite him too. His erection strained against the confines of his trousers, rock hard and aching and he released her from his mouth, tasting her blood in his mouth and on his lips. She was still trying to fight. Draco pinned her wrists above her head and held them to the desk with magic.

"Let me go!" she hissed, angling to kick at him but he stepped in between her thighs so that they were flush against each other. Draco began to undress—the cold buckle of his belt touched her belly and she jumped. Still trying to process the bite, she was twisting and trying to get a better look at the wound, gauge its severity but was having trouble achieving it. The bite was deep red, ringed with blue. Her panting filled his ears; the blood stained her clothing and ran down her clavicle. She met his gaze timidly, eyes fearful and lips trembling.

The bite would leave a distinctive scar. No one could ever mistake it for what it was, and coupled with the other one he'd created on the crook of her arm, no one could doubt whom she belonged to now. Draco felt pleasure upon seeing it. She knew his intent, too, and hated him for it. It was clear in her expression but Draco paid that no mind. In one quick movement his shirt was off and his bare chest met hers, his arousal poked into her skirt, seeking her warmth.

The bite mark was still bleeding; small rivulets of blood ran down her shoulders to form a small puddle on the wooden surface, drenching some strands of her hair. He leaned down and lapped the blood from her skin with his tongue, then stood straight again to meet her hateful stare. Her delicate nostrils flared, her lip curled with disgust.

Maintaining eye contact with his witch, he pressed his fingers into the wound, which was already purpling. Horrified, she tried to pull away but remained trapped under him. A series of noises emitted from her mouth, pained little *unh! unh!* sounds as he pressed harder. Blood smeared over his palm. He pressed more firmly and her gorgeous lips parted in full this time; her scream was choked and hoarse and yet the sweetest thing he'd ever heard. Tears leaked out of her eyes and in a last resort to defend herself she bucked her hips hard to catch him off balance.

Her attempt had the opposite effect, however. The fire in his eyes only danced brighter and she saw the lust intensify, immediately regretting her decision as he grasped the fabric of her dress and tore at it viciously, tearing it from her body easily like it was made of tissue paper. Hermione gasped as the cold air bit into her skin, peaking her nipples and running gooseflesh down her body. He appraised her for a moment, savoring the look of his wife stripped bare and held against the wall before his hands found her breasts, weighing them in his palms and kneading them roughly. She turned her head away.

"Don't do this," she pleaded. Draco ignored her.

His tongue trailed greedily over her soft body, pressing kisses into her flesh as he pushed his hips between her thighs. He hooked her leg around his hip, his whole body ached with intense desire; his cock throbbed with the need to be buried inside her hot, tight cunt. He gripped her hips harder and rubbed his penis against her slit, humming in pleasure. She, however, cringed at the contact, screwing her eyes shut to block him from her sight. Her whole body tensed as she felt him begin to push himself inside her, stretching her, hurting her.

It was something she would never get used to, she thought. With Harry, it would have been different. With Harry, she wanted it, her body and her mind would have given in to his touches without a second thought. But it wasn't that way here. Here, he knew how to trick her body even though she tried not to surrender to his caresses. Her mind was alert and knew it was wrong, that she didn't love him, and that he was forcing her body to react even though she didn't want it to.

She gasped loudly as he pulled back and then plunged inside her again, sending a shock up her spine. Malfoy began to pick up speed, pounding into her so that she found it hard to breathe. She fought against it, she really did, but her body wouldn't let her mind win, and it was harder still now that he had brought his hand down between her legs to tease and circle her clitoris. Her toes curled and her hips pressed against his, seeking to build at the pleasure rising inside her. Once she realized what was happening she stopped abruptly, mortified with herself. Draco took her chin in his hand and forced her to look at him. The intensity in his eyes proved to her that he knew exactly what he was doing, and that he knew he was winning.

"Submit to me," he ordered, rutting into her now. She shook her head, panting, and turned her face to the side so that her cheek pressed against the cool surface of the desk. It was uncomfortable how her whole body moved with the force of his thrusts, having him on top—she wished he would stop. He pulled out, almost completely, and she sighed in relief, thinking it was over, only to cry out when he slammed himself back in up to the hilt. Her vision began to blur, she writhed beneath him and bit her lip when he slowed down his fingers at her clit, steadily applying more pressure.

They were in danger of falling-at least, he was, since she was still held to the desk by magic. He'd managed to push them closer and closer to the edge of the desk, and she felt its edge dig into her left hip but doubted he'd realized. A fall like that she didn't mind at all seeing as it would get him off her but judging from the angle she was in and the fact that her arms were still restrained, damage to her spine or arms was inevitable. Not in the mood for injury, she let her legs wrap around him tightly and he growled with satisfaction as he pushed himself back in, grinding against her. Her muscles were spasming around his cock and he knew she was close. His hands flew to her tits and pulled sharply, rolling them between his fingers so that she arched off the desk in pain and tried twisting away. She clenched around him-almost unbearably tight; he pulled back and plunged again and she fell apart moments before he came. Her cry of release grew louder and became laced with pain-upon reaching orgasm Draco had swooped down and bit into her neck, unable to control himself, feeling immense satisfaction upon feeling his teeth sink into her vulnerable flesh. Luckily, this bite didn't bleed like the other one, the blood trails had turned dark and crusty and dampened with her sweat. Draco continued thrusting until he was well spent, and stopped, breathing heavily.

When he had finished he pulled out, rolled to her side and met her blank gaze. She'd withdrawn into herself again; her arms wrapped around her middle, trying to shield herself. Tears burned bright in her eyes.

"That wasn't so bad, was it, my love?" he asked teasingly, stroking her cheek. Hermione ignored him, clamped a hand over her mouth. She rose quickly, legs shaking, and gathered the remnants of her clothes, covered herself as best as she could even though it was torn down the front.

"Hermione."

How could I enjoy it? What is wrong with me? What have I done?

"Hermione."

She could feel him coming after her and fled the room before he could catch her, sprinted for the first door that she came across but it would not open so she ran up one set of stairs after another, tried door after door until she found one that opened and stumbled in, tears blazing trails on her face. Clutching the wispy fabric around herself she huddled behind a large table, bending at the waist so her face was almost in her lap and she held her head.

He'd made her come. She said no and had tried to get away but her body had betrayed her. It wasn't the first time this had happened, but it certainly was the first where she hadn't been forced to come under the influence of his Imperius. Hermione felt torn in half, just like her gown. There was a dull ache growing in her head and her arms felt stiff and sore from being restrained earlier. Hermione looked down at herself in disgust, pulled her hands away from her knees. His smell was still on her skin-she had to get clean again. She got up, wiped her eyes to clear her vision and scanned the room to see if there was an adjoining bathroom but there wasn't. The only other option was in Draco's bedroom, but what if he was waiting for her there? She'd run away from him when he'd called her-he'd be angry. Was he looking for her now? Hermione listened carefully-she could hear footsteps, but couldn't quite tell how far away they were.

Heart pounding, she listened more closely, and paled when she realized they were coming closer after all-he was going up the stairs. Was he looking for her or was he up to something

else? She wasn't going to wait to find out. Hermione sprinted to another door and darted inside, pulling the door after her. It was an empty closet. She ventured to the farthest corner and waited, hugging herself, shivering at the cold sweat that had broken out over her body.

Inside there it was harder to hear the footsteps over her still pounding heart. Hermione stayed absolutely still and silent for minutes on end, battling the headache that had grown worse. The footsteps came closer and closer and she turned away, too frightened to face his anger when he came in. The footsteps stopped right outside the door. There was the soft sound of his hand sliding down the front of the door, coming to a rest at the door knob. Hermione held her breath.

"Come out, Hermione."

She bowed her head, shaking. "No."

"Little bird, why are you afraid? I'm not angry with you."

She didn't reply and he didn't speak up again. Hermione waited for him to leave.

"I'm not coming out until you leave." Her voice was too weak. She hated herself for it.

He sighed on the other side of the door. "I will expect you to come to bed tonight. I won't have you sleeping up here. If you don't come down by nightfall I will come get you myself." And then he left.

It wasn't until she was completely sure he'd gone that she was able to relax. Hermione slid down along the wall and sat down, exhausted. The urge to shower was still ever present but she didn't feel like getting up again to go check if the coast was clear. There was always a chance that Draco was still lurking around, waiting to catch her. And she was tired, so tired. The headache was still prominent and she felt too weak to sleep but she was content to just sit there and pretend she was sleeping. Draco could go step off the end of a broom in high-altitude, she wasn't going to bed with him. Once this headache went away she'd find somewhere else to hide and shower but for now she would wait for it to pass.

26. Once Upon Another Time

Warning: Language! Do I even need to put these warnings up on every chapter? You all know each chapter is gonna be intense. Song in this fic is Once Upon Another Time by Sara Bareilles. I own nothing. Lyrics belong to Sara Bareilles and all HP characters belong to JK Rowling.

“Jane, be still; don’t struggle so, like a wild frantic bird that is rending its own plumage in its desperation.”

-Jane Eyre, Charlotte Bronte

Chapter Twenty-Six: Once Upon Another Time

Music filled the library; a hauntingly beautiful collection of sounds that seeped into the patient books and their cases. If one looked closely enough the books appeared to pulse with an almost palpable energy. All the windows were open and golden sunlight fell gracefully in, illuminating the room to the point of bathing everything with a soft glow.

In the center of the grand room was a couple engaged in a slow dance, standing closely together and swaying from side to side. From a distance they appeared to be the picture of romance, looking like they were lost in their own bliss as the music played on.

The man stood proudly over his partner-shoulders pressed back and his elegant posture exuded arrogance at its finest. Strong, muscled arms wrapped around his partner and his long, beautiful neck bent down so his head was level with hers. His mouth brushed against the curls by her ear as he spoke quietly, almost pleadingly into it, as he had done so repeatedly throughout the past few weeks. The partner stood stiffly in his embrace, moving woodenly as he forced her to join him in their dance. A hand at the back of her neck prevented her from turning away, the other arm placed on the small of her back made sure the space between them stayed nonexistent.

The unfortunate partner stood deaf and ignorant to his advances. As he spoke into her ear she listened to her thoughts instead, his caresses to her body went unnoticed and unwanted. Distant and full of an intense longing, her gaze was fixed, unwavering on the window opposite them. The burnt umber of her eyes changed to amber whenever the light hit her face but she didn’t notice. Every now and then Draco would dip his hand down to grope and cup her bottom and she wanted nothing more than to leave the room, to leave *him*. Since the day he’d caught her in his office she’d had trouble looking him in the eyes. Just thinking about what had happened made her feel physically ill.

In all honesty she hadn't even known what had happened. Or *how*, for that matter. He'd attacked her on his desk and it had started as rape until something had happened and she had ended up enjoying it. The moans that had come from her echoed distantly in her head and Hermione's stomach felt like it had been filled with venom. Her cheeks burned red-she was grateful he couldn't see her face, busy as he was at her ear.

The occurrences of that day had installed a newer fear inside her, one that made her all the more keen to escape, to avoid him. Draco had sensed that fear and stalked after it like a bloodhound. Not only was Hermione more intensely frightened of Draco, but of herself as well. She had counted on her body to be repelled, to be disgusted by what he did to her, and yet he was learning how to fool her body. Her mind, her whole being was so disgusted with herself she refused to look at herself in the mirror, she felt like she was coated in her own shame-a coat that grew heavier with every day that passed.

There's no way I could have liked it. No, she had thought. He must have slipped a lust potion into something I ate, or he could have used a dark spell? Some improved version of the Imperius? Her thoughts trailed to the bite he'd given her, and her hand instinctively twitched to reach up and cover it with her palm but she couldn't since he was holding her so close to him. It had taken days to heal with Bogg's help, and was now nothing more than rather vividly pink teeth marks which she was sure would remain as scars. What if he'd performed some sort of spell when he bit me? Some magical creatures do have special hormones in their saliva to help their mates... I'm sure I heard something about Veelas having something like this... Oh Merlin, please tell me he's not part Veela...

Or maybe you really did like it, suggested a sinister voice in the back of her mind. *Dirty whore, you liked him fucking you! You wanted it!*

Hermione flinched at the accusation, tears brimming in her eyes. *No... I'd never!*

He had been so smug afterwards. He'd let her flee the room, to her relief, but after that day he pursued her more relentlessly than before, trapping her in the cage of his embrace or holding her down with magic while he explored her body, discovering ways to make her ache for him even though she begged for him to stop.

In consequence to this, Hermione had been forced to begin to take a new approach. When he pressed her down onto the bed and removed her clothing, she emptied her mind and tried as best as she could to detach herself from what was happening. It wasn't easy, but she was Hermione Granger and Hermione Granger excelled at everything, so she worked it like a muscle and progress was made. When he forced his way inside her she stared up at the ceiling until he grew tired of that and demanded she look at him. That was a lot harder, since she frequently lost focus in her detachment at the frightening looks in his eyes or he'd thrust a little harder to make her gasp, inflict enough pain that she couldn't hope to distance herself from what he was doing to her.

All her hatred was channeling into her desire to find a way to escape, which burned more intensely than ever. She'd tried anything she could think of, but nothing worked. Even Bogg was not allowed to speak to her or even be near her unless Draco commanded it. Searching his study had proved useless, so she would have to find another way to get information.

As he spoke his lips tickled her ear but she held herself still. After breakfast (served to them in bed by Bogg-Draco had made her feed him, smirking at her as he chewed on his

hotcakes) he'd taken her to the library, where he'd made her read aloud to him from a dull history book he'd randomly chosen off a shelf. As she read (with an intentional monotone) he had put his head in her lap, forcing her to hold the book up to her face until her arms grew too tired and he had gone off somewhere. Hermione had thought he'd left until he came back and the music began playing from the gramophone in the corner. Draco pulled her up to dance despite her insisting she didn't want to but that never mattered to him.

Hermione had been so lost in her thoughts she hadn't paid one bit of attention to what he was saying in her ear. His hand rubbed her back with a soft pressure that reminded her of how her mother had done the same thing when she was a child in her bed, almost asleep but not quite, and her mother would sing softly to her until sleep claimed her. Hermione gulped hard, as though that would shove the memory away, and turned her focus to his words.

"I would love you like no other can," he was whispering, voice soft as velvet. 'Simply do what I ask-submit to me fully, love me, and I can make you the happiest woman alive.' His lips, warm and soft, pressed below her earlobe. "All you have to do is stop fighting me and let me love you. It will make things easier for you and I." His voice was seductive and low, it travelled down the length of her spine and his hot breath fanned against her cold cheek.

"I..." she began, but trailed off, realizing she didn't know what to say.

"I would worship you, if you let me," he said, his hand at the back of her neck stroking her soft skin. 'I will always take care of you, Hermione.' He drew back to look her fully in the face, the hand at her neck sliding around to cup her cheek. "We were made for each other."

Hermione shuddered at his words.

Like bloody hell we were. What is he thinking?

But then she thought it over. There were some similarities between them: both excellent students, highly intelligent and powerful, both cultured and well-read, but that was it, to her knowledge. She took him in, looking at her with those pale eyes and full mouth. His terrible beauty struck her once more, curiously calling forth a brief memory of the first time she had ever laid eyes on him. They had been eleven, and just about to enter the Great Hall. Harry and Ron had stood by her when he had shown up, his presence clearing the space around them. Small, angelic little face with sharp, bright eyes and a smirking little mouth, she could see he was different. There was cleverness mixed with coldness in his eyes and that twist in his mouth suggested to his arrogance and conceit, which were confirmed as he opened his mouth to insult Ron and try to make friends with Harry.

She remembered thinking it was a shame that he proved to be so unlikeable a person, for she thought if he were more humble, less cruel, they might have gotten along. He was among the small group of students she could compete with intellectually, after all, and sometimes, when she looked into his eyes, she could see traces of the boy he used to be before he turned into the vile man he was now.

Perhaps in another life I could have loved you, she thought, though feeling it was still very unlikely. If things had been different. If you had acted differently in your regard towards me, if you weren't such an unthinking, evil, and selfish prick, perhaps I could have learned to love you, but this is the path you chose and there can never be love between us.

He stiffened curiously and his eyes lost their temporary warmth.

"Is this your answer?" he asked rigidly. Hermione went cold.

Oh damn. I said that out loud.

She didn't reply.

His grip on her tightened. Hermione tried not to wince.

"Is. This. Your. Answer?" he snarled, giving her a slight shake.

Is it? I don't know! I can't think!

"...I don't know..." she admitted, and he relaxed.

"Don't think so much," he said, cupping her chin and tilting her face upwards. His lips pressed onto hers, lingered there. "Would you rather be happy or live in sadness?"

"I'll never be happy until I am free and you know it," Hermione shot back angrily, pulling away. "Even if I give in to you, you can't guarantee I'll be happy."

"I can't," he agreed, "but I'll try." His confident tone angered her. *He actually thinks he'll succeed.*

"You will fail. My answer is no."

His eyes flashed and his mouth tightened.

"Very well. But the offer still stands for when you are ready." He pulled back, dropping his hands from her and Hermione felt the blood rush down her arms, tingling madly.

Draco reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, transparent glass vial with a silver liquid inside. Hermione blanched, first thinking the potion to be Veritas serum until she remembered it was a clear liquid and not silver.

"I'm not going to punish you," he said calmly, having seen the panicked look in her eyes. "This is merely something to help you— a sample, if you will, to see what things could be like."

Hermione had a suspicion as to what that potion was, but if she was right then things were not going to bode well for her at all. Dread coiled in her stomach and she took a step back.

"What is it?" she asked. Perhaps she would be wrong. *Please let me be wrong.*

Draco chuckled. "You're a clever girl, I'm sure you know." Keeping his eyes on hers, he unstopped the vial and he held it up to her nose.

Hermione took a small sniff. Her suspicions were confirmed in that second when the scent of lavender, new parchment, old books and the smell of Harry's robes invaded her nostrils.

Amortentia.

Immediately she stumbled backwards and he followed with a grim smile on his lips.

"I won't drink it."

He chuckled and stepped closer. Hermione regretted not knocking the bottle out of his hands when she'd had the chance. "Are you sure, darling?"

“Of course I’m sure. That’s illegal!”

“Think of it this way then: it’ll hurt less if you take it.”

Hermione faltered, her eyes stuck on the vial in his hand.

He’s got a point... Should I take it?

“No. I refuse to turn into some false, love-starved fool for you. It’s not real consent!” With that said she darted towards the door. She didn’t get far-though she had had a head start, he was quick to catch her, as always.

“Where were you planning on going, little bird?” he asked laughingly, pressing her against a bookcase. “You know you can’t run from me.”

He was right. There was no place she could have gone in the Manor where she would have been safe from him and that vile little bottle. There was no time left to think-he had pinched her nose between his fingers and held the bottle to her lips.

“Mmmph! N-mmff!” she protested, shaking her head vehemently, but his grip stayed firm and her supply of air began to diminish. Though she tried getting away he pushed himself closer to her, restricting her movement.

“Open up,” he growled playfully, his other hand travelling up to grip her cheeks so tightly her mouth puckered open, releasing a pained sob that had been caught between her teeth and her lips. Hermione tried to suck in a breath and close her mouth again but he had stuck the bottle in and poured its contents down her throat. For good measure he covered her mouth with his hands so she wouldn’t spit the potion back out, which she was trying to do at that very moment. She choked and began to cough, her face was flushed and sweaty from the struggle; her hands slapped at his, still over the lower half of her face. Draco let go of her nose and waited patiently until she settled down and the cough subsided, then took hold of her nose once more.

They stood at an impasse for what felt like centuries. It was too late, some of the potion had already slid down her throat by accident, but enough remained in her mouth that she refused to swallow although her lungs felt like they would burst and Draco’s hand still kept her from inhaling and she knew she had no other choice. Hermione rolled her eyes to the ceiling, swallowed, and after some tense seconds Draco finally lifted his hands from her nose and mouth. She sank to the floor, tears leaking from her eyes.

Draco hovered by her, worry and excitement making him fidgety as she sat up, wiping the tears from her eyes. He rubbed her back gently. The changes were small but already taking effect: the rigidity of her posture and motions were fading, when he held his hand out to her she did not flinch or ignore it, she grasped it in her own sure grip and let his fingers wrap around her wrist with no protest.

“How do you feel?” he asked, helping her stand.

To his surprise and pleasure, she leaned into him, burying her head into his chest. Of their own accord, her hands settled on his sides and grasped his shirt.

“Dizzy,” she murmured, “but it’s clearing up now.”

Gently, he led her back to the sofa and sat her down, but by then she had regained composure. Her pale cheeks were rosy and her eyes, when he looked into them, took his breath away. Love and admiration shone in them and a small smile curved her lips as she stood back up and approached him slowly.

Those eyes, those beautiful brown eyes like wood warmed golden by sunlight were staring right at him, drinking him in from head to toe and he fought to control the unexpected blush that tinged his cheeks. All thoughts escaped him, flying out his ears and rebounding around the room at high volume, narrowly missing him each time they whizzed past. It felt as if time had stopped, like she had simply reached into the space between them and gripped Time around its throat, and all it took was one look from her. His thoughts had not yet returned to him. Draco was at a loss for words, but it turned out he didn't need to say anything, because she leaned up on her toes and kissed him sweetly on the lips.

"I don't know how I never noticed how much I love your lips," she said, reaching up to hold his face in her hands. Draco smiled briefly before moaning softly as she kissed him again, more slowly, sucking on his bottom lip and then running her tongue over the top one.

"There are few things I love so much as kissing you," he murmured into her neck, pressing his lips against the hollow of her throat. She pressed herself closer to him, shivering when his teeth grazed her skin.

Draco didn't think he had ever been quite so happy in his life. Surely he was hallucinating? Or was this heaven? No, he could discredit those notions with a few facts:

1: There was no fucking way he would ever get into heaven, if it was even real.

2: He could feel his heart beating furiously in his chest, so he was (thankfully) still very much alive.

3: His heaven was down on Earth, and holy fucking hell, she tasted like it too.

She was carding her fingers in his hair, rubbing gently at his scalp as they kissed and he sighed into her mouth at the feeling. Occasionally she would drag her nails and it made the most delicious shiver run through him. Draco nibbled on her plump bottom lip, drawing it between his lips where his tongue swiped over it before he released it. Starry eyes looked up at him and her flushed cheeks matched the redness of her mouth, which grinned slyly at him.

For Draco it would have been an inadequate statement to say he felt like his birthday had come early. He never placed much importance on birthdays (*they happen every year after all*, he thought. *All you do is age. What's there to celebrate?*) anyway. But this moment stirred something inside him, rousing a memory of a time when he was six and his father had come home early, way before the sun had gone to kiss the horizon. These had been the days before the return of the Dark Lord, when his family had tried as best as they could to put back together what the previous years had torn apart.

He had been tall for his age, with skinny legs and hair that was simply too long because his mother could not bear to have it trimmed. His father had come home early that one day with packages under his arm, calling loudly for Draco to come down. Once he had come into the hall to greet his Father the packages had been thrust at him with an eagerness he had rarely encountered in the man. Draco already knew the first parcel was a broom, and opened it quickly to find a children's model of the CometRacer2000, which he had desperately wanted

since they had been released a week prior. The other parcel contained Quidditch gear, to his delight, and when he looked up to thank him Lucius had held up a Snitch in his hand, already holding his own broom in the other. That day had been one of the best he had ever experienced-his father hadn't even needed to teach him to fly-they gleefully found out he was a natural, and spent hours flying around the impressive gardens searching for the golden-winged orb.

Lucius was at the Ministry of Magic almost daily, having to witness and testify for trials of other Death Eaters including his own. By then Draco had known everything about his father's involvement with the Dark Lord-though no one told him and his mother refused to speak of it around him, Draco knew it all. He wasn't a stupid boy, after all, and loved to poke about his father's study whenever he wasn't home. He wasn't really quite sure what to make of it at first, but he knew that it helped keep his family extra powerful and that power ensured they stayed together even when the Ministry came knocking. Staying together wasn't always easy. He could remember shouting matches between his parents, things thrown against the wall and his mother crying behind heavy doors. Details on these arguments (which were frequent) were never revealed to him, but he could tell his mother wanted out. And at that young age, he couldn't help but wonder why she would want out when there were such great benefits from it. He made the mistake of asking them once. From Narcissa he got nothing but a frightened glance as she swept from the dining room and the sting of his father's hex on his cheek.

After that day there were no more arguments. No more shouting, no more watching the House Elves clean up broken things after the room had been vacated or sitting sullenly on his bed because no one had bothered to check if he was okay.

Though it was a massive relief the arguments were gone, it seemed the love between his parents had gone as well. His mother moved into a bedroom in the East wing of the Manor and his father stayed out nearly all day. Draco never found out what his father did in that time but he suspected he had gone to reunite with old friends-what friends he had not alienated by then, at least. From his mother he sensed more fear than there had been before. Always appearing to be anxious though she tried to hide it under her regular gaiety and loving care, he knew she worried about him from the way she looked at him.

Sometimes her stares made him angry, other times they made him sad. The last thing he ever wanted was for his mother to fear him.

And you've been so careful, haven't you? A cold, mocking voice in his head said. *A Saint, you are.*

What would the look on her face be now, if she knew what he was doing, what he'd already done?

Draco didn't like going down that path. How could he explain to anyone, let alone his mother, that he'd stolen another human being to share in his misery? How he'd let his own selfishness and lust determine his actions, how she was meant only for him? How every part of her called to him always, he was hopelessly lost to her and doomed, ecstatically so, to be hers, just as she'd been destined to be his from the moment they'd first met. With his actions he'd forged a chain for her to wear, to tie her to him, to claim her in every way possible

because there would be no way he would let her slip from his fingers. It was as simple and as difficult as that.

The precious few that knew only had a fool's glance into the whole of the situation. They saw it as a passing lust, a mere schoolyard rivalry to conquer. They had no idea how great this force was, just how deep it lay. They didn't know how much farther he was willing to go for her.

I've become exactly what she didn't want me to become. A monster.

Wish you could take it all back, don't you now? said the voice.

Draco thought for a moment. Did he? Grey eyes flicked over to his wife, who still stood there waiting with that beautifully loving smile on her face, hanging onto his arm as his thoughts raced around her.

No. Hell take me, I'd do it all again for the rest of my life if I had to. As long as Mother doesn't find out she won't have to know how much I've disappointed her.

With his thoughts finally straightened and that new resolution set firmly in his mind, time seemed to click back into place. These thoughts had taken no more than a few seconds but it had happened so slowly that Draco really believed for a moment that the time had stopped.

Yes, Mother must never know, he absolved as he stared at his wife, who was leading him out of the library, a naughty gleam twinkled in her golden brown orbs. That look in her eyes chased his thoughts away and he followed, eager to damn himself all over.

The bright hue of the lavender around her reflected off the pure, snow-white of her gown. As the sun began to set the brilliant purple shone on her skin, making her look ethereal. A small sprig of the plant lay in her open palm as she stared unseeingly into the pond that was a small distance away. The trees and stalks of lavender swayed in the strong breeze, their collective susurrus filled the air and injected a dreamlike quality to the atmosphere.

Birds sang their song from a distance, invisible in the dense foliage. The smell of lavender hung heavy in the air, soothing her troubled mind. Clouds stretched themselves over the sky as if they, too, wanted to keep her from the light, like Draco. Whenever there was a clearance the brilliant sun would shine through and warm her in its fiery kiss before being smothered once more. It was always brief and she was left shivering, even when the sun made its next appearance. She found herself feeling resentful of the sun, that it could not warm her.

Any artist would have fought for the privilege to paint such a scene. A poet would have found it hard to describe the place with words deserving. Hermione paid it no more attention than a bird does its gilded cage.

No, she could not take pleasure in the bittersweet scent of the lavender; she could not delight in the charming ripples of the pond nor the beautiful gown which she was sure she would have loved if it had not been given to her by him. It was already stained with soil and dew from her sitting in the grass-it gave her a savage pleasure to ruin the dress. When he'd presented her with it in the morning there had been a wistful smile on his face as he explained that she would have worn it for their wedding had they ever had the chance to have one.

Hermione had bristled at the comment, and felt rather uneasy that the dress was very lovely indeed and she definitely could have worn it for her own wedding if Draco had never come into the picture.

A long, heavy sigh expelled itself from her lungs and she stared past the field she sat in and the trees beyond her. Harry and Ron were out there somewhere, hunting for the horcruxes. She wondered how many they had found by now, and if they had found a way to destroy them. She hoped so.

The effects of the love potion had worn off in her sleep. Draco had only given her enough to last for the remainder of the previous day, which she was oddly grateful for. To her surprise, the effects of the potion had made her feel... *happy*. Her recollection of the day was vague; the most she could remember was being in a loving, blissful mood and hearing her own pleased screams while they made love.

The instant those two last words formed themselves in her thoughts she felt disgust wash over her. Hermione tried to shake it away. They'd had sex. Love had nothing to do with it, *nothing*, especially seeing as it came out of a bottle. It was still rape. He'd nearly made her pass out just to drink it and she'd made damn well clear he knew her thoughts on the matter. The mere fact that he'd made her take it to get her to say yes at last spoke volumes about how bad the whole thing was.

Still, even though she knew her position remained unchanged she couldn't help but feel conflicted.

That wasn't me, that wasn't me, she repeated to herself.

It was true-she had felt how the potion had shoved her to the far recesses of her own mind and took control over her mind and body (much like the Imperius Curse) and filled in with a fake version of herself. She had watched, incredulous as the fake her had leaned into him and then kissed him boldly, how she had stared up at him with adoring eyes and yearned to make him happy, yearned for his touch.

The potion produced a strong haze in her mind-so strong that no matter for how long or hard she tried it did not let her resurface to reclaim herself. It had felt like a dream, but she knew it wasn't, and now she was feeling the effects of her laborious struggles. Her limbs felt heavy and sore, the walk here had been more of a run, but she had been desperate to get out and finally, finally bask in the warmth she had craved so intensely for the past months.

Hermione didn't know why he had changed his mind on not letting her outside, but that morning he'd led her to the wide back doors, and pushed them open, nudging her outside. The brightness of the outdoors had blinded her for a moment and she stood there, suddenly unable to remember how to walk. She could sense that he had left, and was grateful, her brain sputtered and began to work once more and she tentatively stepped out onto the cool earth.

Perhaps this was a reward for her "good behavior" last night.

Her fists clenched and she felt something crumble and tear in her hand. She looked down in mild surprise to find the small bit of the plant she had been holding, now ruined beyond repair, its essence smeared across her skin. Tiny petals stuck to her palm and fingers and she studied them for a moment before wiping them off onto her dress.

A strong gust of wind barreled through the land, dancing through her hair and lavender into the trees, who whispered more loudly than before. Hermione tilted her head to face the sky so she could feel the cool wind on her feverish neck. The sun dipped ever lower, and the sky grew purple to match the sea of lavender around her.

A terrible, aching wave of longing crashed through her like a sudden summer rain. She felt it acutely, like a hole had been dug into her chest. There was no pain in her heart at all, but her whole chest throbbed with the sensation of it suddenly being quite empty. It was a pain so intense Hermione was rendered quite breathless for a moment. Tears pricked at her eyes so they stung. Not even in her first year at Hogwarts had she felt so homesick, and back then she'd been surrounded by her peers whom she could speak to, but here she had no one but the man who'd put her there in the first place.

How she longed to have someone to talk to! Harry, Ron and Neville, her parents and the Weasely's. How she missed them. For a fleeting moment she imagined they appeared smiling before her.

I wish I was with you, she thought.

The emptiness in her chest grew and she felt so hollow every beat of her heart was almost painful, she was certain that if she were in absolute silence she could hear it echoing around inside her body.

Like bubbles drifting up to the surface of a body of water, fragments of a song she had once loved began to play in her mind. It had been some time since she had last heard it but the words were there, still fresh in her head. Without even realizing it she began to hum along to the melody, but suddenly became aware of how her voice blended into the wind, flying away from her.

Just another thing I have no control over, she thought.

Slowly, her eyes closed and the wind seemed to die down a little before strengthening again, like it was giving her the go ahead to continue. Above, the sky continued to darken.

She opened her mouth and began to sing.

Once upon another time

Somebody's hands who felt like mine

Turned the key and took a drive

Was free

Highway curve, the sun sank low

Buckley on the radio

Cigarette was burnin' slow

So breathe

Just yellow lines and tire marks

Sunkissed skin and handlebars

And where I stood was where I was to be

No enemy to call my own

No porchlight on to pull me home

And where I was is beautiful

Because I was free

He'd been searching the grounds for her for about ten minutes now, and she was nowhere to be found. It was irrational to worry, he knew, since she could not escape, but all the same his steps quickened with each passing minute and he stalked through the brush standing by him. The insistent gales of wind pushed his hair across his forehead, occasionally streaking past his vision like new rays of sunlight.

Giving her the love potion had been the best thing he'd ever done. If Snape hadn't been so insufferably busy most of the time now, he'd have gotten a larger stock from him ages ago.

With a smile he remembered how his witch had moved on top of him the night before, hands holding herself steady on his hips as she thrust herself down onto him repeatedly, screaming her release at last when he reached over and pleased her clit with his fingers. Afterwards she'd collapsed on top of him, sweaty and short of breath and he was still inside her. He'd positioned them so she was underneath him again and he laid on his side with one arm around her, the other under her pillow. It was the best sleep he'd gotten in days, and had woken in a wonderful mood only to find her gone from the bed and in the shower, standing numbly under the water. He felt quite randy, watching her wash herself as the previous night replayed in his head, so he climbed in behind her, expecting her to turn to him and be welcome to his attentions. Unfortunately he'd forgotten that the potion would have worn off by then so he was somewhat surprised when she tensed under his touch and scrambled to distance herself from him.

No words had come from her, but the look on her face was enough to tell him all she felt. Her face was red with rage; lips pulled back in an instinctive snarl that only made him ache harder for her and her small fists shook with the hatred that was written so clearly in every part of her body.

"Don't *touch* me," she finally said with effort in a voice that trembled so badly he wondered that she was able to speak at all.

He took her anyway, pressing her against the wall of the shower with his body and pushing into her so hard her body slammed against the cold cream tile, and she'd bitten back her cry of pain. He'd taken her desperately, like a man possessed, like their first time. When he'd finished he stepped into the streams of water, watching as she resumed scrubbing at her skin with shaking hands. Their eyes met for a moment and the intense anger in her gaze, while it didn't surprise him, unsettled him at least a little. Her mouth was still and straight but her eyes held a promise of vengeance that made him slightly uneasy until he remembered she could cause him no harm as long as that ring remained on her finger.

Draco knew she'd still be angry no matter what he did, so he'd decided then to let her outside. Wasn't it what she'd wanted?

Well, no, said a voice in his head. *She wanted you to free her, but this is close enough.*

When he'd let her outside he would have liked to follow her, to stick around and watch as she reacquainted herself with what she had so sorely missed, but Bogg had informed him his father was in the fireplace, waiting to speak to him.

Narcissa had gotten worse. The new healer had taken one look at the suffering witch and said there was nothing that could be done for her. Draco's heart had sunk to his heels at the news. His mother was dying, and there was nothing he could do.

The bad news had completely eradicated his good mood, and he had wracked his brains for an hour afterwards to try and find a way to help his mother, because she could not die. She simply couldn't.

When nothing had come up and he felt like he could just blow himself up with anger and desperation he stepped outside for a moment to calm himself down. He stood there on the porch for a good minute or two, pulling oxygen into his lungs and breathing it out slowly, slowly, until the red in his vision disappeared and the sky was clear again. There was a wind blowing, rolling through the land and bringing with it the chatter of the trees and a brief snippet of someone's voice. He felt a thrill run through him, alarmed that someone had infiltrated his lands until he listened closer.

Of course it was her. Who else could it be? There was no one but them at the Manor. Her voice was carried to him again on the wind and he walked off the porch, whispering 'Point me' to his wand so he might find her easier.

Eventually he found her in the lavender field (*I should have guessed*, he thought absentmindedly), sitting with her back to him, *singing*.

Once upon another time

Before I knew which life was mine

Before I left a child behind me

I saw myself in summer nights

And stars lit up like candle light

I'd make my wish but mostly I believed

In yellow lines and tire marks

Sunkissed skin and handlebars

And where I stood was where I was to be

Once upon another time

Decided nothing good in dying

So I would just keep on driving

Because I was free

Draco was mesmerized-she'd never sung like this before. Of all the times he'd heard her sing before (which really weren't many), he had heard her hum to herself or whistle softly as she passed through the halls, and there was that time he had stumbled across her in the forest, she had never sounded quite like this. What was remarkable was the change in her voice. She had used to sound so different; her voice was light and free, whereas now it was a bit lower. All the lightness had gone from it, yet it was still the most beautiful thing he'd ever heard.

He listened, entranced, as her orotund voice filled the space around them with its hauntingly mournful tone. The words to the song were somewhat lost to him-he wasn't sure what a tire or a handlebar was, but the meaning of the song was clear enough. The sadness in her voice, the longing struck a chord in him, and he forgot about his dying mother. The soft ground muffled his steps as he approached Hermione, who had gathered her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them.

Draco resisted the urge to press her into the ground and take her under the awakening stars, try to remind her what she had felt the night before. It would only make her angrier.

"You sing beautifully," he said.

The softly-spoken comment destroyed the stillness, sounding too harsh in the wake of her song. She remained where she was, but he could see the shaking of her shoulders stop abruptly, how her body turned to stone. When he sat beside her he saw the fierce redness on her skin, the blush spreading down to her neck and chest.

"Where did you learn?" he asked.

Hermione shrugged. She didn't like that he had heard her sing.

Draco scooted closer, and though she didn't move away, she refused to look at him until he cupped her chin in his hand and turned her head to face him.

"I want to go home," she said.

Her steady, challenging gaze held him in place, lips trembling slightly with the effort not to cry, and he was thinking how much he would like to take her to see her parents, to see Hogwarts again, anything if it meant she would love him the way she had the night before. But he knew that would never happen.

"I know," he replied instead, stroking her cheek with his thumb, "but that's not possible."

"Yes, it is," she snapped. "You just don't want to let me go."

"Why would I want to let you go?" he asked. "Take you back so I can be arrested and given the Kiss, so you can get back with Potter and save the world?"

Her eyes pierced him, and neither said a word until she stood abruptly, leaving him seated on the ground.

Standing, she towered over him for once, and the power that action gave her also gave her the strength to say what she'd thought in her mind.

“Think what you will. You cannot keep me here. I’ll find a way out soon enough, and when I do you’re going to *wish* you’d gotten the Dementor’s Kiss instead.”

She left him then, moving swiftly back into the Manor to someplace she might not encounter him, if at least for another hour. Her threat played over and over in Draco’s mind, stirring worry where there should have been none, and anger, too, but both of those were temporarily drowned out by an idea that’d struck him the moment she’d gone.

He might be able to save his mother, after all...

A/N:

Uh-oh. What’ll this lead to, I wonder?

Read and Review!

27. Fear and Loathing

All characters and other Harry Potter things belong to JK Rowling. Plot belongs to me.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Fear and Loathing

*“Forgive me lord,
for I can’t forgive,
for I can’t forgive,
for I can’t forgive.”*

—‘Forgive Me Lord’ by Among Savages

The locket weighed heavily in his pocket. Harry longed to step outside, take it out, and let it fall to the ground where its ruined remains would be lost among the wild greens, never to cause damage again. Its clasp dug into his thigh as he sat down onto his cot. Harry decided he couldn’t stand having the thing near him anymore, in a quick movement he’d lobbed it across the tent and felt a mild satisfaction when the thing crashed down onto the floor. It had fallen open, so he could see its shattered insides glinting in the dull light of the tent.

They still hadn’t spoken about what had happened when he’d stabbed it. The sword of Gryffindor lay on the cluttered table, and whenever Harry looked at it he felt like he was twelve years old again, holding it in Professor Dumbledore’s office just after defeating the basilisk. It had felt heavier then.

And I had no clue how much more I was in for, he thought dully.

Ron pitied him, he knew. Since they’d destroyed the Horcrux he’d left Harry mostly alone, for which Harry was grateful. Talking about it wouldn’t help; it would only make things worse. Right now Ron was foraging outside for anything they might eat. Food, scarce as it had been before was even harder to come by. More than once they’d fallen asleep on empty stomachs and would rise the next morning, hopeful to find anything edible.

“It’s not real,” Ron had said once it was done. “It’s not. Don’t think about it.”

Only it was so hard not to.

The images plagued his mind, denying him any peace or rest he had thought he would find once the locket was destroyed.

I have seen your heart, and it is mine, it had said.

That hideous red eye had watched him from inside the locket. How had it known?

He had almost shouted when Hermione appeared, sad and defiant, almost believing her to be real until he realized he could see right through her. Made of a ghostly mist, she watched him with a longing in her eyes that called to him. Automatically he took one step forward, but Ron's warning hand on his arm kept him from getting any farther. The locket began to speak, and everything became worse.

"Cursed and lonely, a boy grown with no true family, and continuously lied to by everyone he holds dear."

"Don't listen to it, Harry," Ron said, but Harry stood frozen, transfixed as another pale form began to take shape beside Hermione.

"Followed by misfortune, death always looms close by..."

His heart wrenched. *Sirius. Cedric. Dumbledore.*

Gleaming silver hair and a cruel curve to his lips, the figure that was Draco Malfoy seized Hermione, who began to kick and struggle.

"No!" he heard her scream, but all other protests were silenced when the false Draco kissed her hungrily, devouring her mouth with his own. Harry's fists clenched, his heart plummeted to his feet. Likewise beside him, Ron grit his teeth and said, "It's a trick, it's just trying to mess with you," he said, but his voice was weak with rage.

The false Draco was stripping Hermione of her clothing, even as she beat him away. Harry stepped forward again, but Ron held him back. "It's not real," he insisted. "Just figures in smoke. Kill it now, Harry!"

"In love with one who will never again be his, for she has been claimed by another for the darkness..."

Ron had turned away, shaking. Harry watched, horrified, as Malfoy's form pushed into Hermione, who cried out in pain and struck at his face, pleading for mercy. Hermione's legs were yanked up around false Draco's shoulders and she twisted, trying to drag herself away as he drove himself more deeply inside her. The sword of Gryffindor was cold in his clammy hands; he was holding it so tightly his whole hand went white.

"Do it now, Harry!" Ron bellowed.

"Take a good look, Potter," called Malfoy triumphantly. Leaning forward, he gripped Hermione's throat tightly, wrenching her upwards for a sloppy, rough kiss. There was blood on his mouth when he pulled away, turning to grin at Harry. His teeth were stained crimson.

"She's mine now."

"NO!" roared Harry and he leapt forward, driving the point of the sword into the heart of the locket. A horrible scream poured from it, shaking the silent wood around them but he did not hear it. The figures of Hermione and Draco vanished at once to his immense relief, and he pressed down harder on the sword with all his weight. A black substance oozed from the Horcrux, a thin stream of smoke escaped from between the cracks, and the scream ended abruptly.

He barely remembered what happened after. Ron had said things to try and comfort him, but Harry couldn't hear anything other than Hermione's screams, still echoing in his head. Whenever he closed his eyes he was assaulted with the images of the rape the locket had shown him, and it was all he could do not to break down.

She's safe, she's safe, and she's not with him! he chanted to himself. *Riddle told you lies, it was all lies...*

For all his effort, he found himself unable to believe it.

"She's mine now..." Draco's blood-stained grin flashed through his mind, and Harry struck at the side table, rattling everything on top of it. His wand rolled off and clattered to the floor. His knuckles throbbed.

"Harry?"

He jumped. Ron had entered the tent, and he stood at their shared table, watching him carefully. A small pile of mushrooms and other eats lay on the table before him, the fruits of his scavenging.

"Stop thinking about it," he said. "Everything that locket told you, everything it showed you was a lie. It wanted to break you, Harry. You know she's okay."

"I wasn't thinking about it," Harry said testily, immediately regretting his sour tone when Ron looked away. Silence filled the space between them.

"Sorry," he mumbled. Ron shrugged, and then beckoned him over to the table.

"I found some stuff," he said, pushing the pile towards Harry as he sat down. "It'll help though it's not much."

They ate in silence, drinking spring water from mismatched tin cups. It had grown colder inside the tent. Harry pulled on another sweater, opening and closing his fists repeatedly to ward off stiffness from the temperature.

When they had finished Harry pulled the map from the other end of the worn table, pushing things out of the way to make space for it. It was dirty and wrinkled, but still fairly readable. The label at the bottom bore the name 'Knockturn Alley' in clumsy lettering.

Their route was marked out in red ink. They each had gone over the plan meticulously, making sure everything was correctly thought out. The mission at the Ministry had been dangerous, but seemed like nothing compared to this one. They'd taken the polyjuice potion and slipped into the Ministry of Magic, anxious but determined. Acquiring the locket had been fairly easy, they'd found Umbridge in the elevator, and once everyone else had left they had stunned her, removed the locket from her fleshy throat, and obliviated her so that she would not remember encountering them.

The mission went extremely well, but after they'd dealt with the locket Harry was beginning to feel extremely uneasy. Their former professor was nothing compared to Bellatrix Lestrange. They'd been quite lucky with Umbridge, but he felt fairly certain that wouldn't be the case for the next mission. One misstep and they would be finished before they had even started.

"You're certain she'll be there?" he asked for the hundredth time.

"I heard them say it myself," Ron said.

Harry gazed at the map, going over the route one more time. "This had better work," he said.

The ceilings they passed under were adorned with cherubs captured in mid-flight, one painted at every corner of the room. Their small, pudgy little hands were clasped in prayer, innocent blue eyes raised to the painted sky as if begging for mercy. Hermione found herself wondering if they could spare a prayer for her.

Draco led her through the many halls, pulling her along as she struggled to keep pace. Their footsteps clattered loudly around them, and it struck her how silent the great manse was.

It's like there's no one else here but us, she thought.

Lucius was nowhere to be found, but she wasn't sure Draco was looking for him anyway. He moved with purpose, passing through one place after another quickly. Hermione wondered where they were headed. Surely not his old bedroom. And if not Lucius, then was it Narcissa they were visiting?

As if to prove her correct, Draco stopped in front of the door to his mother's bedroom. Hermione looked up, wondering why he didn't just enter. Anyone else might have thought that he looked calm and collected, as ever, but Hermione could see there was a wildness in his eyes that was just barely tamed, and it frightened her.

He's scared, she thought, incredulous. *But why?* And then she remembered. *Oh.*

Draco took her hands in his. Hermione wanted to pull away, but that look in his eyes made her hesitate. Draco seized the opportunity to pull her closer.

"Whatever you feel towards me now, I am sure I deserve it tenfold," he said in a low voice. "What I have done to you is beyond words. I have taken everything from you, and I know I have no right, but now I must ask for your help."

Hermione was reeling with the words he'd just spoken, and it took her a moment to understand what he meant.

"What kind of help?" she asked warily.

"My mother is dying," he replied. "We've tried everything... nothing works. Perhaps you could help."

She couldn't help the laugh that crept up her throat. "I may be adept at potions, Malfoy, but I'm no Healer. And why would I ever do this for you?"

"You wouldn't be doing this for me. You'd be doing it for her."

Though he had a point, Hermione knew there was slim chance of anything miraculous occurring. "You say you've had several advanced Healers come in to treat her. If they couldn't save her, what makes you think I could? I've had no training, Draco; I only know the most basic healing spells!"

He ignored her and turned to face the door again.

"You will try," he said, ignoring her, and opened the door. He reached behind himself to grab her arm and pull her inside.

The room was ablaze with the sunlight that streamed in from the wide window, and that was nearly enough to distract Hermione from the smell of death that pervaded the room. She had to stifle the gasp that sucked at her throat once the woman in the bed came into view.

Since her last visit to the Malfoy Manor Narcissa's condition had worsened considerably. Her fine porcelain skin stretched tight across her face, paper thin and clammy with sweat. Her cheekbones looked like they were one smile away from bursting through her wasted flesh. There was no colour left in her face-even the once purple bags under her eyes had turned grey, and her lips were pale and cracked. A thick blanket covered her lower body, but it was not enough to hide the spasms that gripped her body infrequently.

It's as if she aged forty years since I last saw her, Hermione thought. *What could have done this?*

Draco knelt at the side of the bed, taking his mother's withered hands in his, and bowed his head nearer to hers to rouse her from her ill slumber.

"Mother," he called softly. "Maman, je suis ici."

There was a second of silence, and then the woman stirred and her eyes struggled to open. A smile lit her face when she saw him. "Mon garçon cheri," she murmured. "My darling boy."

Hermione felt like an intruder witnessing the exchange between the dying woman and her beloved son. Leaving the room felt like the best course of action to take, and she was tempted to do it to give them some privacy but she knew Draco would punish her for it so she stayed. Besides, he was right. No matter how she felt towards him, his mother had been nothing but kind to her, even if they had only spoken once. To be truthful, it saddened her that the good woman would soon be gone.

He truly cares about her, she thought, watching him stroke her head gently. It was strange to watch. Trapped with him as she was most of the time, it was easy to forget that he had a human mask he chose to wear when the occasion called. Was this a genuine show of affection? Or was he merely playing the part of a dutiful son in his mother's final hours?

Narcissa was already in the process of dying. Did Draco know or was he choosing to ignore it? He should not have brought her here.

Mother and son were whispering to each other, and she stood to the side, invisible for the moment. They spoke in French, and she understood it well, but would not allow herself to listen in. The last thing she needed was to develop sympathy for Draco. She would grieve for Narcissa, but never for him. As she watched, Draco grew agitated at something Narcissa said and pressed his face into the woman's shoulder, and she stroked his hair with a calm manner that would haunt Hermione in her sleep afterwards.

She's not afraid to die, Hermione realized. She wished she could be half as courageous as her.

Lost in her thoughts, Hermione had not noticed Draco leave the bed until the familiar pressure of his grip on her wrist snapped her out of it and she found herself being pulled out of the room with such force and speed that for a moment she felt as though she'd been swept up on a broomstick.

"Where are we going?" she asked, but he made no move to answer her. They passed many rooms, each as empty and silent as the last, and climbed up two sets of stairs until they reached the library. Draco led her inside and then shut the doors behind them with a quiet *click*.

Perplexed, she watched as he waved his hand and books from every direction zoomed out from their bookshelves and flew straight for the table before her, landing in towering stacks with thunderous thuds. Something pushed into her from behind and her knees jerked, she fell backwards into a chair that pushed itself up to the table.

One glance at the cover of the nearest book told her all she needed to know. *Magical Medical Mysteries*. Draco had sat opposite her, already thumbing through his second book at an alarming speed, eyes flitting from side to side as he scanned the pages.

This is madness, she thought.

"Draco," she called, and he paused to look up. "This isn't going to work."

The words were too blunt, perhaps, but he had to realize the truth of it. That, and it was hard to think when he looked at her with that wild look in his eyes. His eyes had been pale enough before but now it was like they'd been bled of the rest of their colour. In the harsh light of the sun only the pupil remained. It made her tongue dry up but she had to continue.

"You know we can't save her," she said, softening her voice. She tried not to tremble under his stare. "Don't do this to yourself."

Or to me, she thought. What makes him think I can save his mother?

Did he realize the pressure he was putting her under? Of course not. The death was inevitable, and when it happened, would he blame her? Would he hurt her for it? Hermione felt her insides twist.

Draco looked as if he might strike her, but the table and the books were between them and she was grateful. Hermione's body had tensed and was poised for flight, but relaxed (only slightly) when he shut his eyes and exhaled sharply. Hermione counted to five, and he looked up, calmer than before.

"Stop talking and **read**," he said in a voice that brooked no room for argument. Her mouth opened, a retort already coming forth but she swallowed it and picked up the nearest book instead.

Merlin save me, there's nothing I can do now but humor him.

The hours passed, and with every book that they piled off to the side, Draco's mood darkened. The sound of the pages turning, which once had been Hermione's favorite in the world, was now quite the opposite. Nothing helpful was found, nothing at all, and as the pile

of books grew larger so did Draco's fury. Every now and then he stormed out of the library to go check on his mother, whose condition was only getting worse, Hermione was certain, for each time he returned he would attack the books with a feverish rage, burning grey eyes skimming each page as if expecting to find the cure written there in bold print. She'd shown him a few pages with information she thought might help, and he'd read them through and dismissed them savagely. Hermione was at a loss for what to do.

The Malfoy family's healer had come by earlier to check on his patient, only to say there was nothing he could do. Healer Stark had recommended a pain relieving potion to aid the ailing woman in her passing, and Lucius had sent him away in a fit of cold fury. Hermione only knew this through Draco—he'd kept her in the library the whole time so she would not be discovered, and Hermione had shook with the irresistible urge to run out the door screaming. When he noticed he'd scowled and held her down into her seat with an Imperius, and Hermione listened with tear-glazed eyes as the healer was dismissed.

A while after that she decided she could take no more.

"I'm going to see her," she declared, and swept from the room before Draco could reply. For once he didn't follow; he stayed in the room though he watched her go, almost suspicious.

Hermione ran into Lucius outside Narcissa's door. The older Malfoy looked as handsome as ever, though he appeared as if he hadn't slept in weeks. He smiled thinly at her as she approached.

"Why are you outside?" she asked. "Shouldn't you be with her?"

A pained look crossed his face. "It is Narcissa's wish that I not be with her unless absolutely necessary." Catching Hermione's confused look, he continued. "We have said our goodbyes before, and spoken of our wishes and regrets. There are things I have done that she cannot forgive me. Things I have done that ruined our marriage, and our family. We have made our amends, but she finds it difficult to have me near."

What do I reply to that? "I see," she said.

Lucius cleared his throat suddenly, and stood a little straighter. "I must speak to my son. If you wish to speak to Narcissa, you had better do it now. There isn't much time left." He left before she could reply.

The horrible smell in the room had been covered up with a cloying, sweet scent from many lit candles on the vanity. It curdled in her mouth and Hermione fought not to cough. The woman in the bed was awake, smiling at her daughter-in-law as she entered.

"I wondered when you would come," she said smilingly, gesturing to the chair beside her bed. Hermione sat, and paused. She didn't know why she had come. What could she say?

"I... Are you in any pain?" was all she could manage.

"Just the usual aches and quakes. I would be lying if I said I had grown accustomed to them, but I can manage." Narcissa tipped her head, frowning. "You look frightened, my dear."

"It's nothing," Hermione said hastily.

“Are you sure?” The older woman’s hand pressed into Hermione’s cheek. “Are you squeamish? I was once. We had to cut up a dead salamander for potions in fourth year to collect their livers, and I went and fainted in the girls’ lavatory.” Hermione couldn’t help but smile.

Narcissa looked at her curiously. “But you’re not the kind of girl who can be undone by a mere lizard, are you?”

“No, ma’am.” *A dragon, more like.*

“So what frightens you, Hermione?”

Your son. But I can’t tell you that, can I?

Instead, she said, “Draco thinks he can find a cure. He’s driving himself mad over it and has turned up nothing so far. I’m afraid what he’ll do when he realizes there’s nothing that can be done.”

Narcissa nodded sagely. “I thought he might. He was always a stubborn boy. Blinds himself to the truth when it doesn’t convenience him, like his father. But you knew,” she said, smiling again at Hermione. “And you told him, no doubt.”

“He didn’t listen,” Hermione agreed.

“In that case, will you send for him once we are finished? I’d have a word with him.”

Once Hermione promised to do so Narcissa leaned back into the pillows behind her and sighed softly.

“I’m sorry I had to leave so soon,” she said. “I only wish I could have gotten to know my only daughter-in-law better.”

“I would have liked that as well,” Hermione said. *I wish you didn’t have to go.*

“My son chose himself a wonderful wife,” she said. Hermione forced a smile. “I hope you have more children that Lucius and I had-I’d always wanted Draco to have a brother, or even a sister, but it wasn’t possible.”

That will never happen, Hermione thought. *Not if I can help it.*

Narcissa yawned, covering her mouth politely. “I grow tired so easily now, it’s ridiculous. Before I fall asleep again I should like to see Draco.”

“Of course.” Hermione stood, but Narcissa’s hand caught her arm before she could turn away.

“Promise me you’ll take care of him. Watch over my son, and yourself. He is my only child...”

I am my parent’s only child, too, but there is no one to take care of me. I don’t even know if my parents are still alive.

“I will,” she lied, and fled the room.

Hot tears blurred her vision as she went back to the library, but she would not let them fall. Not there, at least.

"Your mother wants to see you," she said upon re-entering the room. Draco was up at once, striding towards the door, but halted when he saw her face.

"You look troubled."

"Just go."

He caught her face in his hands, thumbing away the tears that had managed to slip out despite all her effort. He looked worried.

"Tell me what's wrong."

"Go!"

He waited a moment or two, but she avoided his probing eyes and with a resigned sigh, he left.

When he found his mother she had almost fallen asleep. A sudden burst of fear exploded inside him and he raced to her side.

"Mother-mother! I'm here."

"My only son," she murmured, reaching for him. "Listen to me and listen well, for I fear I won't get another chance to tell you."

"Don't talk like that, mother," he insisted. "You will live."

"I am your mother and I'll talk how I like," she said in a voice that was meant to be firm but sounded so feeble instead. "I am going to die, and you cannot change that."

A sob tore itself from his throat. "Not today. I'll find something to make you better, *I need time*."

"You need to accept that if I don't die today then I will tomorrow or the day after."

His hand found hers and held it tight. Tears sluiced down his cheeks-he could taste them in his mouth, hot and salty. It wasn't fair that she should die, it wasn't. She was good and had done everything for him, everything. It was she who had persuaded Lucius into sending him to Hogwarts instead of Durmstrang because he had been too afraid to go so far from home. It was she who spent all her time entertaining him, spoiling him to distract him from wondering if he had seen the last of his father at breakfast. She remembered all his birthdays, all the letters he had gotten from home while in school were from her. And when he had fled Hogwarts after completing his mission, with nowhere to go she gave him her estate in France, where he and Hermione now lived.

And the biggest of them all: he'd been born a sickly babe, with a failing heart. The Healers had told his parents he would die in a fortnight if not sooner. Desperate, Lucius and Narcissa tried everything they could-numerous healers and potions for Draco, spells that did not work and liars who only took their gold. Even his father's friends did what they could to help, but nothing worked until the Dark Lord sent them an ancient book of the darkest magic. Many pages had been removed or blotted out but they finally found something-a spell that would

save one life by slowly draining another. When they found that spell the two weeks were almost up and Narcissa made her decision at once.

They had shielded this from him all his life. In fact, if it hadn't been for the Dark Lord, he never would have known. He had even shown him the book, the very spell that had saved his life, and was about to take his mother's.

Since the Dark Lord had told him, he sometimes couldn't help but wonder if his mother regretted it.

Probably, if she knew what I am.

It had not occurred to him to check if there was any way to undo the spell when he had been shown the book. He could deal living with a troubled heart if it mean his mother was alive and well.

Her breaths were becoming ragged and dry; horrible sounds that gnawed at his nerves.

Draco bent his head to kiss his mother's cheek. His tears smeared on her skin. "N'allez vous pas," he pleaded.

"Promise me you won't blame yourself," she whispered. Her eyes were closing again, and her hand had grown stiff in his.

"I promise," he lied. His tears were making it hard to see anything, and his eyes stung, but his heart hurt the worst of all.

If my sickly heart didn't have the chance to kill me before, it can strike now as it pleases.

"I love you, mum," he said shakily, but she never answered.

By the time Draco came back, Hermione had already guessed that the Lady Malfoy had passed away. She tried to read Draco when he came in and sat on the chaise but he was expressionless as stone, and just as cold.

Hermione stood uncertainly.

Should I comfort him? she thought. *He's a monster-Gods, I know it, but his mother was the only person he's ever truly cared about, and now she's dead. She bit her lip. It's like she was the one thing tethering him to his sanity.*

She was suddenly filled with dread.

What does this mean for me?

It was extremely unnerving, how silent he was. Hermione's head pounded, a deafening *pum pum, pum pum*, that made her wince. Unsure of what to do, she clasped her hands at her front and stepped forward until she stood beside him. Silvery-blond hair obscured most of his face from her view, but she could see his mouth twisted in pain. He had crumpled into himself, elbows on his knees and his shaking hands balled up only to fall open, then clench again. There were no tears on his face from what she could see.

If he actually was crying, would I feel sorry for him? Should I comfort him? Would he do the same for me? Does he even want me to? If I begin to sympathize I would be in danger of losing sight of who he really is. But if I am cold and uncaring he will likely punish me.

This is a dangerous territory I'm in, Hermione thought. Would that I never had to cross it.

When she placed her hand on his back the muscles underneath contracted under her touch before relaxing.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly.

It was a long while before he said anything. The silence around them stretched until it swaddled them in its thickness, and Hermione thought they would drown in it if it weren't for her pounding head and the occasional deep breath taken in by the man before her. She was thinking she would leave him to grieve in solitude when he shuddered and stood swiftly, coldly composed as usual. The sunlight in his eyes made them appear completely colourless save for the small black pupil in the center of each, staring straight ahead. That wild look was back, though he tried to conceal it she recognized it flicker up now and then, and when his eyes fixed on her she had to bite her tongue to keep from screaming.

Gods have mercy.

He approached her, still saying nothing, but he held his hand out expectantly, waiting for her to take it. Hermione didn't want to go with him. That look in his eyes promised nothing good for her, and she was positive he was barely holding himself together by the way he held his mouth.

"Where are we going?" she asked timidly, avoiding his frightening stare.

"Home."

Your home, not mine.

Thinking quickly, Hermione said, "Why don't we stay? Surely your father doesn't want to be alone right now, and someone needs to inform the Ministry about your mother's death—"

"My father has spent enough time alone before we arrived. Another couple of days wouldn't make any difference. And I'll not let anyone from outside see you."

When they arrived back at the Manor, Draco strode out of the fireplace and entered the living room with a wary Hermione trailing behind. She had thought to slip upstairs but the crashing sounds that emitted from the living room summoned her instead.

The room was in total disarray. All the furniture was upended and blown to pieces, the windows shattered and gaping open, dripping shards of glass. The sofas and chairs had been slashed open, weeping their stuffing and the tables and paintings and everything else lay broken on the floor. In the middle of it all stood Draco, with his back to her and standing completely still, not at all how she'd expected to find him. The same arm he'd offered her earlier was stretched out again, his long fingers curled into a fist.

He looked perfectly normal, even his breathing was regular, and that only unnerved her more.

"Draco."

He turned to face her. Slate eyes met brown and she found herself immensely surprised at the sadness in his gaze. They shone wetly but no tears fell from his eyes.

Fool. Have you already forgotten? Monsters can feel, too.

"She was half-dead when we arrived. Nothing you could have done could have saved her."

Taking one step after another, he made his way through the debris and cradled her face in his palms gently.

"You're always right, ma petite chaton," he said softly. "Sometimes I hate you for it."

Likewise, she thought.

He bent forward, leaning in close until their foreheads touched and he threaded his hands through her hair, carefully gripped a handful at the base of her skull, as gentle as if holding a butterfly within his hands.

"I need you tonight," he said. "Will you be good, or is another dose of the love potion to be taken?"

"Neither," Hermione snapped, trying to push herself away. "Grieve for your mother by yourself and let me be."

"No." With a flick of his wand the room was set back to rights, and shrugging off his coat, Draco brought her to the largest sofa.

"I don't want to," she said, ignoring how childish she sounded. "Please, just leave me alone."

It felt pointless to try and push him off; to try and protect herself when he never listened. It never worked, he would always get his way in the end, and she was tired of it. But it felt wrong if she didn't *try*. Powerless as she was, it felt like she was giving up, like she had accepted her lot and was allowing him to win, and she couldn't bear that.

He pulled her down with him, lying down on his side and wrapped his arms around her, holding her so tightly it almost hurt to breathe. They faced each other, but she couldn't see his face since hers was nearly pressed into his chest.

He's so cold, she thought, shivering, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

"I really am sorry about your mother," she said, her voice muffled. "But this changes nothing between us."

If he heard, he said nothing. Hermione was beginning to think he'd fallen asleep when he pressed a kiss to the top of her head and said, "I didn't think it would."

Her arms were beginning to fall asleep, and she was still cold. Before she could fully retract herself from his hold, Draco pressed her closer, his hands pressing into her back.

"Don't go. Please."

It could have been her imagination, but she was almost certain she felt a hot tear land on her head. Hermione tried not to groan, and cursed in her head, and fiercely fought the impulse to strike him.

Not like I can, anyway. All because of this thrice-accursed ring.

The hands on her back were digging into her flesh, pleading, demanding something of her that she could not, would not give.

I will not comfort you, she thought. This is all you get. And she stayed absolutely still.

It wasn't until after he'd fallen asleep that Hermione finally allowed herself to cry. The tears soaked into his shirt but she didn't care. Her whole body shook with her grief; she had to take care not to wake him. When she closed her eyes she saw Narcissa in her mind, but the dying woman quickly transformed into her own mother, and then her father, back and forth til she felt her heart might burst. A scream bubbled its way up her throat and her hand flew to her mouth to stifle it before it could escape. Terrible thoughts consumed her mind and it took all the strength she had left to shove them out.

Carefully, she rubbed at her eyes. Both her mouth and her head felt like they had been stuffed with cotton; she could feel herself begin to fall asleep. *I've got to get out of here, I must, I must.*

She had to. This place had been host to too much horror and she would not stand to contribute any longer. Thinking about what the future might hold, what Draco might still have in store for her was enough to fill her with dread. She must not stay any longer or she would die in this house.

A/N:

Some of you asked if she couldn't just cut her finger off to get rid of the ring. She can't. The ring won't let her use anything to harm herself-if you look back at chapter eighteen there's a tidbit where she found a pair of shears but couldn't pick them up. The same would happen with a knife or something similar. She can't touch one unless she has Draco's permission.

28. Things Finally Start Picking Up

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Things Finally Start Picking Up

“I was meant to be a warrior please

Make me a Hercules.”

—Hercules-Sara Bareilles

“Mum? Dad?”

There was no reply.

The narrow hall was dark, even in the light of the morning, which streamed in weakly from the kitchen up ahead. Two small black frames adorned the wall to her right, when she looked at the pictures her parents smiled back at her, frozen in their poses. Out of all the frames that had once hung on the wall, only two remained. Without thinking, Hermione raised her arm, her hand found a particular spot on the pale yellow paint.

The photograph of the three of us in Paris used to hang here. And here— her hand moved along the cool, grainy surface, here was one of me on my first birthday, and there was one of me and dad on a fishing trip.

One by one, she envisioned each photograph where it had once been, but all that met her now was a bare wall except for the two on the left.

Her own bedroom was at the other end of the hall, facing her.

Dare I look?

The door seemed to expand, almost as if it was mocking her, daring her to enter.

No. The pictures and the lonely hall were enough. What would her own room do to her? And besides...

It's not my room anymore.

Her legs itched to move forward, but she didn't move.

*I'm home, she thought. I'm home, **I'm home!***

And she was; only she wasn't really. All traces of her had been wiped from the neat little brick house.

A tear trickled down her cheek. Hermione wiped at it impatiently.

This is ridiculous. I shouldn't be crying. I'm home, and I should be happy. I'll find mum and dad and lift the spell and maybe go to their favorite ice cream shop and I'll tell them how much I love them.

With that decided she exited the hall and found herself in the kitchen.

There's that silly porcelain chicken Jen got Mum for Christmas years ago, and the scorch mark on the wall is still there, from when I accidentally set them ablaze the day I got my Hogwarts letter.

The cheerful little kitchen gave her strength, and through the heavy silence she heard voices. Her heart leapt into her throat.

The living room greeted her next, and at last, there they were. They sat on the couch facing the telly though it wasn't on, holding something in their hands.

"Mum! Dad!" the words came out in sobs she was so happy. Hermione rushed forward. "I've come home!"

"Hermione?"

"Yes, Mum, it's me!" she said, laughing, and stood before them. "I've missed you so much —"

"Who's Hermione?" her mother asked.

What? Oh, the spell. Of course they don't remember. Lift the spell, you dolt!

Giddily, Hermione reached into her pocket for her wand, and found nothing. Odd. Frowning, she checked the other pocket, and something on her hand snagged on the fabric.

Why am I shaking?

Light glinted off the ring prettily, the large gems caught all the light in the room and suddenly Hermione was doused with cold clarity.

I'm in a dream.

"No..." she moaned, turning back to her parents.

They were reading a letter together, brows furrowed in confusion. Hermione looked at the envelope, which lay beside her father on the couch, and felt an absurd swell of hope rise inside her.

Mr. Weasley sent it! They know I'm missing!

"Do you know any Hermione Granger?" her mother asked her father.

"Not at all," he replied.

*It's me, **me**! She wanted to shout. Your daughter!*

"This Arthur Weasley sounds very worried about her. I wish we could help, but I've never heard of this Hermione," her mother said, placing the letter down onto her lap. "I suppose they must've mixed up the address."

"Lovely name, though; Hermione," her father quipped in an appreciative tone.

It is, Hermione thought, blinking back tears as the dream began to fade away. You chose it.

The cut on his cheek was bleeding again. Ron grimaced and pressed a scrap of cloth to the wound. If he wasn't such a dunce at healing spells he would have healed it right after they had left Knockturn Alley, but he would rather let it heal naturally than risk it with magic. In his other hand was the hair. Long and wild, it was, tightly curled in some places and straight in others.

Much like the person we got it from.

Bellatrix Lestrange was a madwoman, which was one thing all wizardfolk agreed on regardless of what side they were on. Dangerous and unpredictable, she was, which was why he and Harry had to be the same to get what they needed from her.

Stupidest plan we've come up with so far, really, and that's counting the things we did in First Year.

He and Harry had donned disguises-bits and pieces to wear from Fred and George's shop and bits of Polyjuice to make sure their true identities would not be revealed. Once that was done they'd gone separately to Knockturn Alley to find their places and wait until she appeared. Ron had heard days prior that their target was to pay a visit to some unsavory shop-for what, they didn't care to know, but a miraculous opportunity had presented itself to aid them in their next mission and that was all the incentive they needed to act upon it.

They ended up waiting hours until she showed up. Ron had nearly panicked, thinking it was a trap or that Lestrange had decided not to end up at all. The streets were deserted as always, and Harry had the Cloak for extra measure, even if he was in disguise. Wedged in extremely narrow alleyways opposite each other where neither could be seen, they waited until they heard her approach. A Death Eater accompanied her, scowling without his mask.

Harry moved first. Quickly hobbling towards the woman with a chipped cup in his hand, opening his nearly toothless mouth to beg for a coin, Harry flicked his eyes at Ron, who emerged stealthily from his hiding place, wand ready.

"Spare a sickle, m'lady?" Harry wheezed. Ron Stunned the Death Eater, caught him before he hit the ground and lopped off a short lock of hair. He allowed the Death Eater to drop the rest of the way down with a quiet *thud*.

The woman had already rounded on Harry, flinging curse after curse until he staggered backward, too busy shielding himself to fire a hex back.

"Filthy, undeserving scum!" she hissed, eyes widened with fury. Ron hastened over and raised his wand but she had heard him and turned with a hex on her lips. A slash opened on his cheek and blood poured out. Ron cursed and crouched to avoid the killing curse she sent next, and shot another Stunner back. All the while the woman was shouting at them, obscenities and the like while spinning away from their curses. The battle was going nowhere and all sported wounds-if it hadn't been for her companion's limp form that she tripped over and lost her focus, Ron felt they might have been done for.

They hadn't been able to Stun her, either. Bellatrix Lestrange was much too clever to allow that. They took one step towards her and she shot them a cruel smile, showing her yellow teeth. That smile formed ice in Ron's veins.

She's going to kill us, he thought, bracing himself to counter-attack before her face changed to that of one in pain, and grasped her forearm. Conflict flickered in her eyes for a brief second. Ron knew what she was thinking: kill them, or attend to Voldemort's summons? She sensed Harry's next move before even Ron could and Apparated away with a cackle, and the red jet of light hit the brick wall behind the space she had previously occupied.

There was no reason to linger. They'd left instantly, and now Ron was just realizing how stupid they'd been.

We could have been seen. She could have called for backup! Summoned more Death Eater cronies? For fuck's sake, the Dementors could have got us!

And yet they didn't, a firm voice in his head said. *You got what you needed and made it back in one piece.*

The cut throbbed, and sighing, Ron picked up the cup in front of him.

And this is just as dangerous, if not worse, he thought as he added the hair into the potion. He watched as the potion turned black, and fought not to gag at the smell.

"Merlin's balls, that's foul," he groaned. Ron had had to endure many bad smells in his life, but he was sure this was the foulest he had ever come across.

Fantastic. Bloody fantastic.

Before he could dwell on it more, he held his breath and downed the sickly concoction, silently thanking Fred and George in his mind for a childhood of daring him to eat questionable things. But this, this was worse than any of it, worse than the mud mixed with garden gnome's piss, worse than the cut up flobberworms in his stew, worse than anything he'd ever tasted. Twice he thought he might retch but he clamped his lips shut and forced himself to swallow with tears in his eyes. He was gasping when he was done, and by then his features had begun to bubble and twist, he shrank quite a bit and his hair lengthened, curling past his chest.

Gods, this feels wrong, Ron thought, panicking as he looked down at himself, but only succeeded at getting a direct view of his breasts. A shiver of revulsion coursed through him. Luckily, they were covered by the robes he'd been smart enough to slip into before he'd taken the potion, an old but simple pair that they'd deemed was something the madwoman was likely to wear, and important above all else: totally black.

"This is mad," he said. "Completely mad."

The robes were so long he was able to keep his trainers on, for that he was grateful. They felt a bit loose, to be sure, but they were better than the heels. The mere thought that he and Bellatrix Lestrange had nearly the same sized feet made an absurd giggle push past his lips.

Ron spent a few minutes getting used to his new height, walking around the length of the tent on unsteady feet.

This would have been easier if Hermione was with us, he thought sadly. *She was the best actress of us three.*

"Ready?" Harry appeared, wearing a Death Eater's form. Ron looked at him enviously. He'd grown a foot and plenty of muscle had turned him into a thick rope of a man, only his

unfortunate face Ron did not envy. But, they'd drawn straws and his was the shorter, so there he was.

This is going to end horribly.

"Yeah. Let's go before I change my mind."

So far, this was all the information Hermione had been able to gather:

1: All the doors leading out of the house were always locked. Nothing she did could fix that.

2: Only Draco could access the Floo. Various searches had not been able to find where he kept the powder for it, but she wasn't sure she would use it if she ever did find it. The Floo network was always watched by the Ministry, and she from what little Draco told her, Voldemort had already taken over there.

3: Any newspapers were instantly burnt once read. Draco always read them alone in his study in the evenings, and she was forbidden to enter until he was finished.

4: Bogg was forbidden from ever helping her escape. (He spent little time enough with her as it was, but after she made the mistake of mentioning S.P.E.W, he completely avoided her unless Draco ordered him to wait on her.)

5: The only other person who had ever been inside the Manor was Blaise, but she had not seen him in weeks. This led her to suspect he and Draco only met when she was asleep, to avoid her listening in to their conversations about the war, or whatever else they spoke of.

6: The ring prohibited her from using magic, be it with or without a wand. *Only* with permission from the owner could the wand work, or else she could not even *touch* the wand (much the same with weapons of any kind, even a butter knife). Hermione frequently wondered where he had found such advanced magic.

7: The Manor had at least five floors. Rarely did they ever go up to the last two floors, which were filled with grand empty rooms and locked doors. She couldn't imagine why anyone would want to live in a house so big. There was a great stone balcony in the back of the great manse behind some French doors. Draco had led her up there once some weeks ago, only to take her from behind against the cold stone as punishment after he had found her trying to steal his wand while he was asleep (before she had known it would not have worked anyway). It was very high up and made her dizzy to look down-she had cried when he had raped her up there in broad daylight. The stone cut into her tummy and bruised her all over, and he'd bent her over the edge and forced her to look down even as she begged for him to forgive her (something she was ashamed of) while he took his pleasure. When he had finished her whole front was scraped and raw and red all over, and her nipples were chafed and bleeding from rubbing against the stone.

She had always been frightened of great heights, even as a little girl.

And he only helped make the fear worse, Hermione thought, scratching her hand absently.

The dream she'd had that morning had left her in a foul mood, made even fouler when Draco had decided to wake her by placing his mouth between her legs. While she dreamt his tongue tasted her and she was all but torn from slumber when he forced an orgasm from her and the shock washed through her even after she had pushed him away. Sleep had claimed her again shortly after, and she had eagerly succumbed to it, falling back asleep while he moved around the room.

Since Narcissa's passing he had fed her the love potion more frequently, sometimes consecutively for days on end, ignoring her when she warned him days had to pass before another dose was taken. There were side effects if the potion was not taken correctly, she had tried to warn him, but he would not listen.

In the beginning she had fiercely fought the effects of the potion the first and the second and the third time he'd given it to her. The sixth time, she was too weary to keep fighting and let the numbing haze envelope her mind. The love potion filled in that empty space she left easily enough, and Hermione discovered that with a bit of practice she could tuck herself away deep inside. There, she could tune out everything that was happening 'outside' and no one could reach her. It was quite comfortable, too. Or sometimes, if she wanted to, she could focus and see what the fake her was up to.

Under the Amortentia's influence the days and nights passed faster than before, and she would emerge and claim herself again once the potion wore off. More often than not, when she 'woke,' she would find herself sprawled atop or beside Draco, who would smile a stupid soft smile at her.

Today, however, she awoke and found herself on Draco's bed, naked save for the sheet draped over her lower half. The cold air hung heavy over her bared skin and she shivered, uncomfortably aware of the pleasant soreness between her legs. It took some effort to sit up since she was so sore but she did it anyway and sent the sheet flying to the other side of the room before getting off the bed. It took her a moment to realize Draco himself was not there with her, and relieved, she let herself relax. There were no clothes laid out for her anywhere—that meant he had either forgotten or did it on purpose.

I'll burn all his clothes off while he's still wearing them, and see how he likes it, she thought angrily. The sheets were her only option, but she didn't want to go anywhere near them. They smelled of him and her and just thinking about what he did to her in them made her want to cry.

She was still cold, though. Hermione sighed and walked over to where the sheet had landed on the floor, and bent to pick it up when she caught sight of the green jumper lying beneath the bed. It looked warm enough, so she picked it up and pulled it down over her head, pushing her arms through the long sleeves. It was a little scratchy against her skin, especially against her breasts, but it was long enough to cover her where she wanted it to and saved her the trouble of finding some trousers.

Once she'd done her business in the loo she tried the door, only to find herself locked in. It didn't bother her.

That only means one thing, she thought to herself as she curled up at the window seat, tugging the hem of the jumper over her bruised knees.

Blaise is here.

The air inside the vault was too heavy; it made him feel like each breath he took might be his last.

And right now, it might be.

His foot shifted and accidentally nudged a golden cup, which exploded into several more cups, burning hot to the touch. Harry cursed and edged along more carefully, reaching for the cup of Hufflepuff. It was still too far, though.

"I don't mean to be a bother, but we do need to be quick," Ron called nervously. He stood by the vault's opening, already knee-deep in the cursed treasure. Harry could see his skin reddening from the heat—Ron was trying not to move to keep from activating any more of the cups.

"I'm trying!" Harry hissed, shuffling forward carefully. It was no use. There was gold everywhere, and even if his shoe barely grazed the damned things the replicas would come raining down. If he wasn't careful he would be buried alive in gold.

That's the dream, isn't it? He asked himself sarcastically. He tried reaching for the cup again, but it was too high up. The only solution was to climb the pile of treasures and take the cup, quickly, before he drowned in gold.

Good thing he was a good climber. He was feeling somewhat grateful to Dudley and his little posse growing up, who liked to practice boxing on him, or Ripper, Aunt Marge's dog, who always chased him around. Both always had him going up trees or scaling high fences for safety, and by the time his Hogwarts letter had come he was a natural. So Harry braced himself and began to climb.

By the time he reached the top his hands felt like they'd been beaten raw and pulpy and stuffed into thick rubber gloves. Everything he touched burnt him and it took effort not to cry out when the blisters seared his skin. His robes were smoldering and he smelled burnt hair but paid no mind and reached for the cup though it was still too high.

Damn. Damn, damn, damn.

And then it hit him. The sword!

It took a few seconds of pawing at his pockets to remember he'd slung Hermione's purse over his body and scrambled to open it. His wounded fingers fumbled but at last he drew the sword from the charmed purse and wildly thrust it towards the cup, hoping he could catch it by a handle. It could have been a trick of his mind but he could have sworn the cup actually moved away from the sword, as if pushed by an invisible hand. Harry had to lean forward, trying not to fall over to try again, but at last the task was accomplished and he was free to make his way back down. He slogged through the sea of hot gold as fast as he could but it felt like the coins and cups were trying to drag him down into their depths as their numbers increased. His legs ached, his heart pounded and he was burnt all over by the time he reached Ron.

“Let’s go. **Now.**” Ron didn’t need telling twice. They pushed through the piles of gold with all their strength and left the wretched trove behind them without a second thought, only to come face to face with the goblin Ron had Imperiused into watching for intruders outside the vault.

Ron immediately reached for his wand, but Harry stopped him. “It’s too late,” he said as the goblin began to shout for help and run to the main corridor, “they would have found out at one point or another. *Run.*”

As they ran, Harry remembered the cup, and decided he would destroy it now before they could be intercepted. But as he slid the cup off the sword, he realized it had already been taken care of. The neat, golden little cup was twisted and charred beyond repair. Harry had little time to relish the dart of triumph that shot through him before a wail of an alarm began to sound throughout the tunnel.

“Shit,” Ron muttered, turning pale. They began to run even faster. Harry dropped the sword and the cup into the purse just as they reached the railcar.

“Go, go, go!” they shouted, and with a groan the car lurched forward. Harry allowed himself a moment of quick relief before the dread pushed its way back in and he realized their mistake. The alarm was still blaring and there was shouting behind them but he dared not look back. Not only that, they were going the wrong way, he was sure. A sideways look at Ron told him he had come to the same conclusion.

“What,” he began to ask, but was cut off as the car stopped abruptly and tipped over, dumping them into the darkness. Ron screamed. Harry’s mind was racing, racing, trying to figure out what was happening. There was nothing but darkness below and something huge and white off to the side. They were falling, falling, and if they weren’t killed on impact then whoever found them surely would. Harry felt as though he had left his stomach at the start of the fall, but his heart was in his mouth, bloody and red and pumping so violently it was sure to burst and they were about to land, he could feel it and they were going to die and he would never see Hermione again—

“ARRESTO MOMENTUM!”

The words flew out of his mouth before he knew he wanted to say them, but that was fine just fine because suddenly they were hovering inches over a dark ground that looked as though it would not have greeted them warmly. There was a second in which he was able to catch his breath and Ron gaped in shock and then they landed lightly.

They stood shakily. Ron looked as if he might throw up. Harry made sure he still had the purse.

“I could kiss you right now, mate,” Ron said faintly.

“Don’t,” Harry warned. “We’re not out yet.”

They weren’t. Wherever they were, it was dark and spacious and... earthy. There were rocks beneath his feet—not cobblestone or marble but regular, sharp rocks. Where there weren’t rocks there was damp soil instead, and unless the ringing in his ears hadn’t gone away yet there was an odd rumbling noise in the area around them.

It’s getting closer, too.

Ron seemed to have heard it too and drew his wand. "We're not alone."

"No."

The rumbling grew louder, only there was a new noise mixed in. *Chains?*

"Rude of them not to tell us we would have company." Harry had to appreciate how light Ron's voice was, even if he was afraid. It was a welcome distraction because he was afraid, too.

Harry looked around. There was a hulking white mass approaching them, though in all the darkness he couldn't tell what it was. He drew his wand as well.

"Yes," he agreed. "Very rude."

Something was the matter with Draco, Blaise had decided, and he was positive it had nothing to do with his dead mother. That wasn't to say his friend wasn't still grieving, because Blaise knew he still was, but this was something else. Something more troubling.

Part of him was dying to ask, but he figured Draco would tell him in his own time. They knew each other well, and if Blaise knew one thing about Draco it was that the pale prince did not like to be rushed. That and he was terribly possessive of the secrets he chose not to share with anyone.

"They'll find out soon that she's not with the other two," he said, "and they'll start looking for her. Aren't you worried?"

"If they haven't noticed she's missing by now they'll never find her," said Draco dismissively. "Especially not here. I've taken every precaution necessary and extra to make sure she won't be found. If by some miracle they find this place, I have other locations I can take her until the searches cool down, but for now, I've no need to worry."

"Potter doesn't seem like the type who'd let up on searching for her," Blaise said offhandedly.

"No, he probably isn't, but I've a plan for that as well." Draco smirked.

"You've got this all figured out, don't you?" *Exactly how long ago did you realize that this was what you wanted?*

"I protect what is mine," said the other darkly.

Hoard, more like, Blaise thought. *You lock up your wife in your room like she's a bleeding sorcerer's stone. Yeah, mate, that's how you'll secure her affections. But all the same...*

"Well." Blaise set his glass down and rose from his chair. "If that's all?"

"Sit."

I'm not your bloody House-Elf, he wanted to say, but Blaise sat back down, disgruntled but curious.

"I'm sure anything won't happen, but in case it does, in case I'm called away by the Dark Lord or if we're found, I want you to promise me something." There was an edge to his voice—that and a tinge of desperation, which Blaise was not used to hearing in Draco.

This does not bode well.

"What?"

"I want you to take care of her. Promise me you'll make sure she is safe from them."

The shorter of the two young men threw a sharp, concerned look to the other. "What-do you think something's going to happen?"

"I'm sure we won't be found, but if anything should happen to me, I want to know you'll be there to protect her from them."

"Why *them*? They'd never hurt her." *She's practically their Virgin Mary, you'd think, by the way they treated her.*

"She's precious to our side, Blaise—to *me*. Someday she will be made doubly so, and I would not hesitate to start another war if she is lost."

Blaise wasn't quite sure what to think. *Start a war? What is he going on about?* He thought on Draco's words some more. *Doubly precious...*

Thinking this referred to the impending pregnancy of the witch, Blaise nodded solemnly.

"Of course."

The blind dragon had flown off after they landed in the water and was rapidly turning into a gaunt shape in the sky. Harry and Ron had already reached the shore and immediately stripped off their sodden costumes before changing into dry clothing from Hermione's purse.

"Bloody mad," Ron said, pushing strands of wet hair away from his eyes. "Ride a dragon? Break into Gringotts! And we're still in one piece! *Mad.*"

Harry wasn't listening. The brisk waters had soothed the stinging of his burnt hands and he struggled to move quickly, slinging the purse over his body once more and withdrew his wand.

"We're going to the Burrow."

It took a second for Ron to register his words. When they did, his jaw went slack.

"Wha—the Burrow? Have you lost your mind? What for?"

"I need to *know*," Harry said. He lurched forward, seized his best friends' arm and turned on the spot.

Neville's dinner stared up at him from his plate, but he made no move to touch it. The sound of his schoolmate's chatter, once lively and boisterous, had since faded into a quiet

murmur of voices in the great room. Ginny's seat was empty beside his-her family had sent for her to return to the safety of the Burrow once it had been discovered Hermione had been taken. He was glad to know she was out of harm's way, but now that she was gone he was left in charge of commanding what was left of the DA. Their meetings had grown more frequent, but as they had all made much progress, their danger of being discovered had risen too. Indeed, if it weren't for the enchanted coins Hermione had come up with in Fifth Year then none of their meetings would have been possible. Neville was proud of them all— "the resistance," as Seamus called it. For what they were training, he couldn't say exactly. Harry had warned him of battle and that was all, so he was doing his best to make sure they would be ready for when it came.

He glanced at the staff table. The Headmaster's seat was empty as usual. Neville wondered what kept Snape so occupied that he spent most of his time in his office. His eyes wandered down the length of the table and he caught eyes with Professor McGonagall, who gave him the tiniest nod. Neville acknowledged it and turned away. His back was still very sore from the lashings he'd gotten some days past. Thinking of it sent his gaze wandering back to the staff table, and he watched the Carrows eat angrily.

We will take you all down.

Dean and Seamus were watching him when he looked down at his own table. Their eyes were inquisitive.

He knew what they meant, and gave another tiny nod. They looked away promptly. Neville reminded himself to send a message through the coin once dinner ended. First he would need to go get the Maurader's Map, which Harry had left him before he had gone.

"You'll need it more than I will," he'd said, "and you'll be the first to know when I come back."

But when? How much longer must we wait?

Months had gone by, and as each one passed Neville grew angrier, and impatient. McGonagall had all but banned him from her office; he had taken to visiting her frequently to see if any discoveries had been made in Hermione's case. Another glance at Hermione's empty seat made his fingers tighten around his knife. The Slytherin table beside the Gryffindor table boasted another empty seat-Draco Malfoy's, which was directly opposite Hermione's. Hatred surged inside him in a strong current.

He has her now, he thought. What must she be going through?

A loud laugh caught his attention and he looked up to clash gazes with Pansy Parkinson for a fleeting second before she turned away to clap her hand on her friends' arm, still shrieking with laughter. Zabini, sitting beside her, wiped his mouth and left the table, grinning to himself. Neville felt a hot streak of hate course through him as he too rose from the table abruptly.

He had to know. Wasn't Zabini the murderer's best mate? He must know something....

Not sparing a glance back at the faces turned curiously to him, Neville strode out of the room and into the hall, looking quickly in each direction to gauge where the Slytherin had gone.

"You're looking for me, I'll wager?" The handsome Slytherin stepped out of a shadow just ahead.

"Yeah, I am," Neville said angrily. "I want to know what you're still doing here at Hogwarts."

Blaise quirked an eyebrow innocently. "Isn't it obvious? I came back to finish my studies."

Neville wasn't fooled. "You were part of the group that broke into Hogwarts last year to help murder Dumbledore. You didn't have to come back. You shouldn't have."

"I was pardoned, don't you remember?" Blaise asked. 'And in case you have forgotten this as well, I was not the one who killed your beloved Headmaster.' He tipped his head. "You forget much, Longbottom."

"You should not have come back," Neville repeated. "What are you up to?"

"Many things, and none of them your concern."

Neville narrowed his eyes.

"You know where Malfoy is."

"Now, I don't recall ever mentioning that," Blaise said, leaning against the wall.

"Where is he keeping Hermione?"

Blaise laughed. "You ask too many questions, Longbottom. It would be best if you asked someone who had answers."

"Lucky, isn't it, that I've found him?" Neville asked, pulling his wand out of his pocket.

Blaise mirrored him. "Sure about that, are you?"

"I'll ask you one more time, Zabini, and this time I expect an answer. Where is she?"

"What does it matter to you? Mooning over your lost love, is that it? Did you fancy her?" With a swirl of his robes, Blaise darted to the side in time to dodge Neville's curse. He stood, a gleam shone bright in his dark eyes. "That's it, isn't it? Either you love her or you just wanted her in your bed."

Too focused in his words, he'd let his guard down, and Neville's hex sliced at his cheek. Blaise hissed in pain, wiping away the blood.

"It's neither, you arse. She's like a sister to me, and with or without your help I'm going to get her back." Neville ducked to avoid Blaise's Stun and sent his own back in retaliation.

"And what makes you think I'll help you?" The Slytherin asked, sneering. "We've chosen our sides. Best stick to them."

"Your side will *lose*," Neville snapped, narrowly avoiding another curse. "It's obvious, but you're too blind to see it because you've aligned yourself with Malfoy."

"You know nothing, Longbottom," Blaise snarled, slashing at the air with his wand. Neville gasped and clutched at his wounded shoulder, but stood his ground.

"It's too late for Granger," he continued, circling Neville. "He'll never let her go."

He felt a little bad, saying it, but it was the truth.

“SHUT UP!” Neville roared, and with a slash of his wand Blaise slammed into the cold stone wall roughly. There was a clatter as his wand fell from his grasp and rolled to the floor.

“I mean it,” Blaise said heavily through coughs. “You think hiding around the school will help her in some way? She is leagues away from here, and every day that passes Draco’s hold on her grows.”

“*Liar.*”

“Oh, does it bother you to think of it?” Blaise asked, pulling himself back up. “Then you should have protected her better if you care about her so much. He captured her because *you* pathetic lot couldn’t do *one* thing right.”

“You help her, then.”

Blaise fell silent, clutching his ribs. Neville had a look of resigned hatred on his face and had lowered his wand.

“Pardon?”

“I don’t know where she is, but you do. You’ve seen her, haven’t you.”

Blaise collected his wand. “I have.”

“So get her out.”

“It’s not that easy, Longbottom. You think he hasn’t got trackers on her? He doesn’t let her out of his sight. It would be easier to steal from Gringott’s.”

“The least you could do is try. You know she doesn’t deserve what he’s doing to her.”

“You say all this like I won’t be putting my own life in danger as well as hers.”

Neville half-raised his wand on impulse, then put it back down, letting out an impatient sigh.

“So you won’t help her?”

A little ways behind them, the doors to the Great Hall burst open, and the students began to stream out, chattering amongst themselves.

Blaise put his wand in his pocket. “I’ll try.”

He left promptly, leaving Neville alone in the corridor that was quickly filling with people.

His shoulder was still bleeding and his head hurt quite badly.

Neville slammed his fist into the wall behind him, relishing the pain that laced up his arms, and set off to the Gryffindor Tower. There was a DA meeting to announce.

The wards allowed them to slip through and they stole through the grounds, straight to the ramshackle house. It had been Harry’s design to enter through the front but upon nearing the

yard, he caught sight of a figure standing by the hedges, watching them, and he set towards it at a faster pace than before.

It was George, they came to find upon reaching the gardens at last. Fred had stood with his back to them, but it seemed upon sensing his twin's shock he turned and joined his brothers.

"Harry!" they said in unison, with equal parts surprise and curiosity in their like voices. "Ron!"

"Where have you been?" Fred asked, just as George asked, "What do you need?"

Ron began to say something, but Harry cut him off.

"Where is she?" he asked.

The twins exchanged uneasy glances.

"Come inside, you two," Fred said. "The others will be happy to see you, and it's better to speak of this indoors."

"You two look like hell," George added. "Rest awhile, and then we can talk."

"We can't," Harry said curtly. "There isn't time. *Where is Hermione?*"

The twins looked very unhappy.

"He has her. Malfoy. Ginny looked for her everywhere the day after the Christmas ball, but couldn't find her. She wasn't on the Hogwarts Express, either. We reckon he took her after the ball."

Ron swore. Harry felt numb. *The locket wasn't lying...*

"Has there been any news? Any message from Malfoy? A ransom? Anything?" His voice was weak, desperate.

"Nothing. McGonagall and the Order have been searching since we found out."

George rubbed his neck. "We thought she was with you lot. We all worried, but knew that if you three were together, you'd be safer that way."

"Well you were wrong," Harry snapped. "That bastard stole her." He suddenly felt quite sick.

"Look," Fred tried again. "Mum and dad will want to see you both. And Ginny. She feels especially guilty, since she was supposed to find Hermione before they left the school. Lupin, Tonks, and Charlie are coming 'round for dinner, so we can try and figure something out."

This time Ron spoke up before Harry could.

"We can't. We've already put you at risk just by coming here, and we haven't finished what we set out to do. Tell mum and dad we're sorry, but we don't want to put anyone else in harm's way. Tell them we'll see them soon."

The twins seemed like they wanted to argue, but nodded solemnly. It was strange, Harry thought. This was the first time he'd ever spoken to the Weasley twins and had not laughed once. But there was nothing to laugh about now.

“Before you go,” George said, ‘we’ve come up with loads of new items in the time you both have been gone. We thought some of them might help in the near future.’ Fred nodded. “There’s a bag of them in our room, they could be of use to you.” Sensing Harry’s hesitation, they both said at once, “We’ll be quick, we promise.”

“Alright,” Harry said. “But quickly. And don’t tell anyone we’ve been here until we leave.”

“Gotcha,” they said, and with a wink they Apparated into the house.

The words the locket had spoken repeated themselves in Harry’s head, threatening to split his mind in half.

Your fault. It’s all your fault, a sinister voice hissed at him.

Ron stood still and pale beside him, enwrapped in his own worries.

The twins were back as quickly as they promised, and presented Harry and Ron with a sack of goods, which they grimly accepted and deposited into Hermione’s charmed purse with muttered thanks.

An awkward silence arose. Ron cleared his throat. An expression of sadness etched itself onto the twin’s faces. It seemed they all realized at the same time they had to part.

“Be careful, you two,” Fred said quietly. “Don’t go breaking into any more banks.”

A chuckle burst from Ron’s throat. “You heard about that?”

“Aye, who hasn’t?” George asked, grinning. “What were you doing?”

“Something stupid,” Harry and Ron said together.

“That sounds right up our alley, hey Georgie?” Fred asked his twin. They looked at Harry and Ron with sparks in their eyes, grinning. “We’d be glad to help if you’ve got anymore Stupid planned.”

“No,” Ron said at once. “Stay with the others, they need you here. We’ll contact you if we need you.”

Fred and George were obviously displeased, but said nothing more.

“Do everything you can to find Hermione,” Harry said. “We’ll be looking, too. Take care of yourselves and the others.” Fred and George nodded, eerily serious.

“Tell Mum and Dad I’m alright,” Ron added quietly. “I’ll be home soon.”

“Be careful, Ronnie-kins,” they said sadly, and Ron and Harry Apparated away at last. None would admit it, but they all wondered if they’d seen the last of each other.

29. Crave My Heart

Disclaimer: I own nothing but the plot.

Chapter 30: Crave My Heart

*“How I wish you would see the potential,
the potential of you and me.
It’s like a book elegantly bound but
in a language that you can’t read
just yet.”*

—I Will Possess Your Heart-Death Cab For Cutie

The last flash of green light faded and the room was dark once more. Bodies lay crumpled and stretched out over the polished floor; a carpet of dead flesh draped in black. The hall had gone completely silent save for the dry, rasped breaths the Dark Lord took as he regained his composure and lowered his wand, though his crimson eyes still danced with rage. The ones who had not run had been spared; they stood unmoving and silent except for Bellatrix Lestrange, who wept quietly to herself on her knees for having failed her master.

Draco was glad he had not brought Hermione with him inside the hall. The Dark Lord had demanded he bring her, and with dread in his heart Draco obeyed, but he had left her with Bogg in a locked room. Bringing her here to this meeting would have provoked the snake man’s anger further, and he had no doubt that Hermione would be one of the many murdered on the floor had he taken her inside.

He didn’t need to look around to see the fear on the other’s unmasked faces. The stench of fear and piss was strong in the air, and it was delicious. Draco did not flicker an eye when the chaos had erupted, nor when the bodies began to hit the ground-none of it mattered to him. He was safe where he was, the Dark Lord would never kill him. There was only one thing he must make certain-he scanned around him quickly and finally located Lucius standing to the side; expressionless, but alive.

“Leave. All of you, except Draco,” the Dark Lord spat, and the assembly wasted no time in following orders. Draco remained where he was until all were gone, and stepped around the sea of bodies to reach his master.

“I would speak to your whore now,” he said. Draco snapped his fingers and Bogg appeared in a wisp of smoke.

“Bring her,” he said, and the elf disappeared.

"You're angry with me for touching her last time," Voldemort said, watching Draco closely.

"Yes," Draco said stiffly. "With all respect, my Lord, she is my wife. Only mine to torment. You could have damaged her beyond repair. You could have *killed* her."

The Dark Lord let out an amused chuckle. "That I made certain would not happen, Draco. The Mudblood is still in one piece, is she not? I am not as inconsiderate as some may think."

Bogg appeared then, with Hermione beside him. Hermione had steeled herself for this, he knew, but it seemed it was not enough. It was easy to see the tremors in her limbs and the way she recoiled once she caught sight of the bodies around her. Bogg disappeared immediately, and she was left alone until Draco reached for her.

"You're looking better than when I last had the pleasure of seeing you," the Dark Lord said by way of greeting, and she looked at him coldly. "Has our Draco been treating you well?"

"Draco is *kind* enough to bestow every possible attention," she said, her voice thick with contempt. "Anything I could ask for, he offers, yet I never once entertained the notion of seeing you again, but here I am."

The Dark Lord's lip curled to reveal a sharp, yellow tooth. "You ought to bow before me, silly girl. This is not a matter of your interests-I demanded you be brought here. It makes no difference to me if you would rather be elsewhere. You would complain of your husband's generosity?"

"Your interpretation of his actions is very different to mine."

The Dark Lord stepped closer, toying with his wand. His long, weathered yellow nails scraped against the wood every now and then and Hermione resisted the urge to run. "And what name would you give them, then?"

"Cruelty," she said, and turned to meet Draco's eye. She had to fight to keep her voice from wobbling. "Torture."

Draco's expression did not change, but something dark clouded over his eyes.

"My," said the Dark Lord, wearing a particularly unsettling smile, "you see what your wife thinks of you, Draco?"

"It is no surprise to me, My Lord," Draco said honestly. "My wife is not shy when it comes to sharing her opinions."

"Nor facts," she interrupted angrily, "and here is one: I am not your wife!"

There was a brief silence in which neither man responded, and her voice echoed around them. Draco looked calm but she could sense the anger roiling beneath his skin. Voldemort on the other hand appeared amused.

"How can that be so?" he asked, voice coddling, as if she were a child refusing to go to bed. "You wear his ring. I see that mark on your arm-no, don't try to hide it, Lady Malfoy, I have seen it before anyhow. The spells on that ring are as binding as an Unbreakable Vow-your husband saw to that himself. I can sense them on you. Furthermore, your marriage has been documented and filed away at the Ministry like any other, my puppets took care of *that*."

"I wouldn't care even if the Minister himself married us," she hissed. "I was kidnapped and raped! Nothing was done with my consent!"

"I grow bored of this argument," the Dark Lord said in a warning tone.

Draco grabbed her by the arms roughly. "Regardless of what you think, little bird, we are legally married and there is nothing you can do to change it. I am your husband, you are my wife and you need to learn to accept it."

"I am not your wife," she insisted. It was hard to see through the tears gathering in her eyes. "I am your prisoner."

"Whatever label you want to put on it," he said angrily, leaning over her so that she bent at the waist. Their noses touched, his hand crept up to grab a fistful of her hair at the base of her neck. "The fact remains that you are mine. Even you admit it."

At this she wanted to protest-the warning look he gave her was enough to quell her voice. Without blinking, he held the stare for several seconds to make his point clear, and she finally pushed him away once he'd let go of her hair.

Hermione had had enough. Rage made her bold, and without saying another word, she turned and headed for the exit. This time she actually reached the door before something hit her in the back and she was unable to move. What had happened last time was still prominent in her memory, and Hermione struggled against the hold of the spell. She would rather brave Draco's fury at the Manor than a minute alone with Voldemort.

The immobilizing charm was exchanged for an Imperius, and Hermione made her way back to the center of the room, unable to resist the Dark Lord's summon.

"You may leave when I give you permission, and only then," he hissed, and Hermione felt how the spell manipulated her into feeling ashamed at what she had done, despite how she truly felt. A blush stained her cheeks and she bowed her head.

"Forgive me my Lord, I acted without thinking."

"That will do."

She raised her head and he stood before her. Cold and sharp, his fingers under her chin tilted her head up to meet his demonic gaze. He ran his knuckles along her temple.

"Your husband may enjoy it when you fight him but I am not a patient Lord and will not tolerate disobedience for long, though I do find you entertaining. Remember who your superiors are, witch."

"Yes, my Lord." The claw-like hand turned her head toward her husband, and she felt herself blush again with shame. A thick stripe of shadow concealed half his face but he didn't notice-his eyes were on her, angry and promising retribution. She began to shake.

"I'm sorry." The Dark Lord let her go and she went to him immediately and knelt at his feet. Automatically his hand wound into her hair and gripped tightly, forcing her to face him. "I'm sorry, Draco. Please forgive me."

His other hand stroked her cheek, soft as a whisper, and her blood ran cold. "I'll forgive you once we get home. Now get up."

The Imperius was ended as she stood back up. Draco made no move to touch her and she became doubly nervous. Fighting the embarrassment for what she had done under the influence of the spell, Hermione glared at the Dark Lord.

“Dare touch me again, and I swear upon my life death will find you as easily as I breathe.”

Draco’s hand tightened around his wand. *Stupid girl. Brave, stupid girl.*

If the threat moved the Dark Lord, he did not show it. There was a curious look in his gleaming eyes but it passed quickly, and his lips thinned.

“As easily as you breathe, you say?” he asked, smiling so his rotted teeth showed. The Dark Lord did not move but a spell was cast, and immediately Hermione’s head jerked backwards as if someone had got hold of her hair and pulled hard without letting go. Her neck was exposed; Draco could see her rapid pulse. As he watched, an invisible force squeezed her throat hard enough to make Hermione gasp and he tensed.

“Tell me then, what would happen if you *stopped* breathing?”

“You won’t kill me,” Hermione replied evenly though her voice was slightly hoarse. “At least not yet. Harry and Ron have done something and you wanted answers so you had me brought here.”

“Just so,” his dry voice bounced around the hall. Hermione was released from the spell; when she brought her head back up she resumed her look of hatred. “I hope in time that stubbornness of yours will be corrected but we have devoted enough time to that matter today. Now, will you tell us what you know, little lioness? You will be rewarded if you do.”

“I will tell you one thing,” Hermione said. She had stopped shaking, but Draco’s warning grip on her arm did nothing to calm her down. She’d drawn herself to her full height and there was that fierceness in her expression he loved so much, and would love more if she was not using it now when it could cost her her life, regardless of what she said. There was a pulse throbbing in his fist, it took him a moment to realize it was from her arm— strong, quick beats that felt as though they were meant to shake him off. Draco loosened his hold but did not let go.

“I know no more than the last time I was here.” she said. “Or have you forgotten that your *servant* here has me bound to him in every way possible? It would be impossible for me to do anything without him knowing. You are wasting your time.”

Draco chose to ignore her choice of words regarding him.

Servant? Aim higher, sweetheart. Much higher.

She was lying, and Draco knew it. There were few instances in which he had chosen to see into her mind, but they were enough to convince him she knew *plenty*. But the Dark Lord had only invaded her mind once; he had only met her once, whereas Draco had known her for years. The girl had been a blight in his life once, but he had grown and she became just the opposite. In the beginning he had learned things about her by chance, yet over the past year had studied her more carefully than any book he had ever read, and he fancied that by now he knew her better than anyone—even Potter and Weasley.

She was expecting him to oust her, he could tell. One look was all it took to hear the whirrings of the mechanics of that brilliant mind, possibly trying to formulate more lies should he do it.

So he could have called her out on her little lie and aid their side, but the Dark Lord had been right.

He was still angry.

She's got to have something up her sleeve.

Curious, he watched as the Dark Lord frowned and used Occlumency on Hermione, who was apparently ready this time. All the same, she stiffened against Draco and screwed her eyes shut but she made no sound until it was over. When her eyes opened again they were weary and bloodshot, but still defiant. A little trickle of blood ran from her nose. Draco pulled out his handkerchief and gently wiped it away.

He was thorough this time.

Voldemort was angry. It was obvious Hermione had won this round. No expression showed on his flat face as he studied Hermione, who glared back.

"You've done well with her, Draco. But I would not let that arrogance run rampant any longer. Teach her her place once and for all or I will."

Draco could feel Hermione bristle beside him; he applied more pressure to her wrist. "I will, my Lord."

The Dark Lord sneered. "Get her out of my sight."

The second they arrived back at the Manor Draco sensed something was amiss. Something felt wrong. The first thought that crossed his mind was that the wards had been breached and the Manor had been infiltrated-on instinct he pushed Hermione behind him roughly, looking around themselves for any sign of intruders. The lack of protests from her caught his attention, and he turned round to glance at her.

She feels it, too.

An impossible hope suffused the air around her as she looked around them, and it angered Draco.

Anyone who tries to take her from me will be drowned in their own blood.

A curious shuffling sound came to them from the living room, and at once Hermione dashed to it, to her supposed rescuers. He let her go this time; Draco knew better. If someone had been able to break in, he would have known by now. This had to be someone he trusted. It had to be Blaise.

He was proved right in the end. When he entered the living room he saw Blaise had seated himself quite comfortably on Draco's favorite armchair; he grinned at the pale wizard.

"I heard the Dark Lord is in high spirits today."

"I didn't see you there," Draco replied, grasping his friend's hand in greeting. Sensing Hermione try to leave the room, he turned towards her and called for her to stay. An indignant look crossed her face but she sat herself down away from them.

That will do for now.

"I wasn't summoned," Blaise said. "I have better things to do in Hogwarts, it seems. The renegades grow bolder; I've been attacked almost daily since last week."

"And what has Snape done to stop them?"

"Nearly everything he could think of, but it isn't enough. They're crawling around the castle like insects, holding meetings and practices and Merlin knows what else. For every ten the Carrows capture there's twenty more."

"You hear that, my love?" Draco asked Hermione, who had been listening in to their conversation quite keenly. "Don't look so dour, there's hope for you yet." His tone was mocking and cruel, a cut designed for the insulting look of hope on her face earlier. It had hurt him more than he cared to admit, that look of such intense yearning to be taken away from *him*, from her rightful place.

Much to his irritation, she did not reply. Hermione faced the windows, which he had ordered Bogg to cover again. Addressing Blaise, he added, "What news of Longbottom?"

Blaise's face clouded. "Disappeared. We all saw him at dinner yesterday, then this morning comes word that the stupid sod tried to break into Snape's office. Filch caught him, but Longbottom broke free and no one's seen him since." He chuckled. "First years say he's hiding down in the dungeons. Upper years are betting on the possibilities of him either having gone into the Forbidden Forest or that he's dead."

Draco had not looked away from Hermione, and this time she did not disappoint him. Underneath her dark hair her face had turned white as snow.

I've got you now, sweetheart.

"He's not the only one, either. Since then loads more students have gone missing. The castle's been searched from top to bottom and nothing's been found." Blaise shifted in his seat and winced. Draco missed this, as he was still watching Hermione.

"Longbottom was the one suspected to be leader of the renegades, yes?"

"Both him and the Weasley girl, but her parents took her out of school months ago."

"When he is found, have him sent to me."

Her head snapped up, and she looked at him, horrified.

*We'll see how hopeful you are when your friends are disbanded and punished. You should not long for anything but to be with **me**.*

Blaise frowned. "Snape will want to deal with him first."

"*He will be sent to me.* Severus has enough on his plate, don't you think?" By the look in his eyes, Blaise didn't agree with him, but he nodded anyway and the subject was dropped.

Hermione was still watching him anxiously. Draco gave her a cold smile.

“Please don’t hurt him.”

Aha, he thought triumphantly. *So concerned for your friend, aren’t you?*

He lay on his side, head propped up on one arm, his arm slung over her hip, tracing lazy patterns onto her vulva through her nightie. She was curled up on her side facing away from him, her hands tucked beneath her head as she tried to escape into her dreams.

After Blaise had gone Draco had taken her in the bedroom without mercy, still angry about her behavior when meeting the Dark Lord. She had suffered through it until the end, when he wondered aloud if he should take away her contraceptives as punishment, and only then she had hastened to beg for forgiveness, though he saw the contempt that remained deep within her eyes. In the end he had finally forgiven her, only after he made her take him in her mouth again. Now her reddened, puffy eyes were fixed onto the window as she tried to come to terms with what she had done willingly for the sake of self-preservation.

Within minutes she asked again, and Draco ignored her.

“You were hoping to be rescued today,” he said. Hermione sniffled and resisted the urge to push his hand away from her—she had tried earlier, when he’d started, but had come to learn his patience was gone for the day. Her bottom still bore the red marks from his hand and she laid on her side to relieve the pain.

“I hope for it every day,” she admitted quietly.

His hand paused and he looked away. *I already knew this, yet it still stings.*

Draco pushed himself off his side to straddle her, cupping her cheeks in his palms. He leaned in close, looked deep into her eyes.

“Listen to me carefully, little bird: It won’t come.”

If there was some way he could drill the words into her head he would do it. Here was her place; her new home and she should be happy.

Why aren’t you, he wanted to ask her. Brown and beautiful, her eyes swam in a pool of tears but even through her sadness the rage was still there, burning eternal under her skin. He thought of that hope he’d seen in her eyes earlier, and jealousy twisted at his heart.

“No one is ever going to take you away from me. I will kill anyone that tries.”

“Let go of me,” she said in a whisper. “Please.”

Reaching down between them he grasped her arm, the one he’d carved his mark into, and pressed down on the scar with his thumb as a reminder. When he pulled his hand away her flesh went red; the silver scars stood out clearly.

“I claimed you. No matter what happens you will always be mine.”

Frightened, Hermione tried to push him away. “Stop it!”

He silenced her with his lips, crushing them against hers though she writhed underneath him, trying to roll away. With a bit of effort Draco secured her wrists and softened his kisses until she stopped, looking through him at the ceiling while tears tracked down her cheeks.

Her lips were so warm and soft, he couldn't keep his own away from them. Each kiss was a desperate plea, turning angrier when she never responded.

"Sing for me."

Catching a curly lock of her hair, he pulled it carefully, watching as she tried not to wince. She still would not look at him.

"I know you can hear me," he said, squeezing her hip. She winced again from the pressure but kept silent. "Sing or I'll tear out Longbottom's vocal chords once I get my hands on him."

I might just do it anyway.

"What would you have me sing for you, my lord?" the last two words were said in a tone that was meant to insult, but it had the opposite effect on him. She sounded tired and defeated though he knew come morning she would be a lioness again.

"Anything you like, I'm not picky," he said, and at last rolled off of her, lying on his side once more. "But sing it as if you were singing to Potter-I want you to mean it. And face me."

She faced him, but her eyes were closed as she began. It was a lovely one, he decided; sad but lovely.

It might be lovelier were she not thinking of Potter. I should not have brought him up.

As she sang, he listened carefully. The sentiment was sweet; it was a song of longing. Several times she repeated her desire for the moon to come, for a lover to return.

Draco wrapped his arms around her, pressing her into him, breathing her in. His hands pressed onto her stomach, onto her ribs, where he could feel the music vibrate. She felt so *alive*, with every word that left her throat, every note-it was a moment he intended to capture forever so he paid close attention, absorbed as most of it as he could. In short, he was the perfect audience of one.

Every now and then he almost broke the illusion-he'd squeeze too tight or twitch unintentionally and her closed eyes would tighten but she hardly faltered. Draco was fine with this as long as she did not stop.

Soothed by her voice, his eyes began to close. Holding back a sigh, he pressed his face into her neck and kissed her skin lightly.

Remember, remember, remember. You are singing to me, not him. I am here, not him. Think of me only.

And though she had tried to imagine that it was Harry lying there with her and not Draco, Hermione failed. It was Draco there, Draco who seemed to have broken himself into millions of little pieces and arranged them all around her, for wherever she went he was ever present on her mind. She felt herself covered by a dark, heavy veil, and that was Draco himself.

When he pulled her closer she wavered in her song but kept going. She knew his design, and was helpless to stop it. How could she remember when she'd never forgot?

She fell asleep shortly after finishing, but Draco stayed awake long afterwards. Her song played in his mind again and again, stirring his jealous heart, preventing him from sleeping.

A/N:

(Thanks to Sammy, who recommended the DCfC song!)

30. Lie To Me

I own nothing but the plot. Characters belong to JK Rowling. Song in this chapter is Buy the Stars by Marina and the Diamonds. Seriously, go check it out. I am in love with it and how well it fits this fic.

Chapter Thirty-One: Lie To Me

*“You bought a star in the sky tonight
Because your life is dark and it needs some light
You named it after me, but I’m not yours to keep
Because you’ll never see, that the stars are free

Oh we don’t own our heavens now
We only own our hell
And if you don’t know that by now
Then you don’t know me that well
—o-o-o-o—
Still, you’d like to think you own me
You keep buyin’ stars
And you could buy up all the stars
But it wouldn’t change who you are
You’re still livin’ life in the dark
It’s just who you are
It’s just who you are.”*

A few nights later, she laughed for the first time.

The radio had been set out and tuned to his favorite station where they sat in the library. Hermione was somewhere near the fire, pretending not to be anxiously listening for the news broadcast. Draco lay sprawled lazily on the divan, listening to the announcer chatter on in between songs. It made for a comforting hum in the background as he focused on darker

thoughts. Time droned on and he found himself slipping into slumber. All coherent thoughts slipped from his mind, and he was in a state of content drowsiness, allowing those taxing thoughts to fade away for him to ponder over another time. Just as he felt himself drop into that void of unthinking bliss, he was jolted awake by Hermione's laugh.

It was quick and loud; the kind of laugh that bursts unexpectedly from one's mouth. The announcer must have said something amusing; he strained his ears but it had passed, and another song had begun to play. Wide awake now, he whipped round to face her where she sat on the floor in front of the fireplace. She made for a lovely picture; sitting on her knees with the fabric of her gown pooled around her. She'd surprised herself too, apparently-as he watched she pressed her fingertips to her lips as if she could not believe what she had just done.

Feeling elevated, he made his way over and sat down beside her. She did nothing; simply continued staring into the dancing flames with her hand covering her mouth.

It had been so very long since he had last heard her laugh. Draco could readily admit it was one of his favorite sounds, that laugh. Many a time back in school he would find himself yearning to hear it-even if he was in the Great Hall surrounded by talkative students, he would tune them out and wait for it. In class, that laugh would distract him from his note taking, from adding the right ingredients to a potion, but he never cared as long as he could hear it. And then everything had happened and she had not laughed since.

Until now.

"It's normal to laugh, you know," he said carefully. "It's actually quite healthy for you."

Her eyes glowed with the light of the fire before them. Slowly, her hand was removed from her mouth and she swallowed before speaking.

"It feels wrong. I shouldn't be feeling happy."

Yes, you should. "Why not?"

"Why do you think?" her voice was bitter.

"Because you can't stop thinking about all your friends and family still out there, possibly suffering. We're in the midst of a war and you hate yourself (as well as me) for being here surrounded by luxury, even if it wasn't by choice. You want to hate it, want to hate *me*, but you're getting tired of trying to fight it."

She clasped her hands tightly in her lap. He could see her lips tremble.

"I'm so glad you understand." Her voice was stiff, mocking. Draco cupped her cheek in his hand.

"You can't stay angry forever, Hermione. Nor can you be sad all the time. It's tearing at you, I can tell. It's a natural thing to want to be happy. So go ahead-laugh and give us a smile, and no one will judge you for it."

She shook her head adamantly, frowning. "No. That will only make it all seem like it's okay, and it's not. I refuse to pretend. Leave me alone."

Before she could react he had pushed her onto her back and settled himself over her, knees on either side of her body. She protested, but he merely batted her hands away as his hands slid down to her sides and began to explore.

Her first thought was that he wanted sex, but as his fingers wriggled along her abdomen she was struck with his intention, and for a second she thought she would have preferred the sex to this. She squirmed under his touch and he smiled wide, lightly pressing his fingers into her side and then added a bit more pressure when she sucked in a breath.

Gotcha.

Picking up speed, his hands flew from her stomach to her armpits to where her neck connected with her shoulder (where he knew she was highly sensitive), flicking and wriggling his fingers against her skin. Harsh pants and broken fragments of laughter expelled from her lips, which she was trying so hard to keep shut as she repeatedly tried pushing his hands away, biting her lips to keep the sounds at bay. Draco felt her body convulse under his, knew that she needed to laugh, and craved it. She had denied this to herself (*and to me*, he thought wryly), so he would bring it to her. Her resolve was crumbling, he could sense it. That beautiful mouth was open now, lips curling into a smile, but no laughter came forth.

"Stop this," she panted, even though she wasn't actively fighting him anymore. "Please."

"Oh no, love," he growled playfully. "You know you need this. Stop fighting it."

And with a quick maneuver to bunch the skirt of her gown up to her waist he bent low, brought his lips to her bare tummy and blew a loud raspberry, turning his head rapidly from side to side.

That was all it took for her to let go.

It was possibly the richest laughter he had ever heard come from her, he concluded, continuing the raspberry as she twisted and shouted and clutched at his arms. Her belly heaved with it, and he smiled triumphantly into her flesh, his fingers dancing on her skin. Tickling behind her knees left her breathless and he kissed her as she laughed, swallowing her joy. He could almost feel it bloom inside of him, warming him down to his toes.

He broke the kiss and rolled off of the girl to her side on the plush carpet, panting. The laughter had ceased the moment he had taken his hands from her and their heavy breaths filled the air around them. Her eyes had closed and as he watched, tears rolled down from behind her lids and down the sides of her face.

"Oh, love," he murmured, and went back to her, scooping her up into his arms.

"Let yourself be happy, Hermione," he pleaded, his lips rubbing against her temple. He pressed soft kisses into her cheek, wiping at her tears with his thumbs. She turned away from him, curling into herself.

"I could never be happy with you."

Her voice and her words, though quiet and weak, held enough power to stab into his heart.

She had curled into the fetal position, shaking weakly in the flickering light of the fire. At once he was both furious and yet incredibly sad; he wanted to strike her or kiss her until her

tears went away. He wanted to kiss the sadness and despair out of her, to suck at her until all that shined in her eyes were not her crystal tears but love and happiness.

In the end he did nothing. The satisfaction of his earlier victory had died out as quickly as her laughter had once he had left her. The longer he watched her the more upset he became; the anger that had festered inside him for so long began to bubble over the surface.

It happened so quickly, it took him a second or two to realize what he had done. A glass tumbler that had been on the nightstand now lay in thick shards scattered around the floor, the wall had a dark spot where the glass had met it and a small splatter of water adorned the floor. He hadn't even heard it shatter.

She had uncoiled herself from her little ball and looked at him, eyes wide in fear.

It wasn't enough. Panting, he lunged at the nightstand and snatched the heavy lamp. With a forceful flex of his arm the object sailed across the room and greeted the wall with a loud crash, shattering upon impact. Hermione shrieked and covered her head with her arms as the shards rained down on her. Then his glass paperweight met the wall. Object after object was introduced to the wall, and when there was nothing left to throw he drove his fists into the wall, into the armoire, into the wide full-length mirror. His knuckles bled profusely and his hands ached something terrible, there was a shard or two embedded in his fist and he pulled them out without blinking. It *still* wasn't enough. His anger demanded to be assuaged.

Through his haze of fury he dimly registered her shouting for him to stop but he was past listening. The lushly carpeted floor was a minefield of glass and mirror shards. Sometime in his outburst he had ripped the sheets of the bed and had tipped over the chaise. The room was in utter destruction. In the center of the mess was the Hermione, thoroughly shocked and completely still and unharmed.

"After all I've done..." he began, breathing heavily. "Everything I've done for *you*, for *us*, and it's not enough?"

Her mouth opened into an angry 'o'.

"I never said it wasn't enough!" The colour rose into her cheeks. 'I never wanted *any* of this! You forced all of this on me!' Tiny cuts lay scattered across her arms; one above her eyebrow had begun to bleed. "What's more, what exactly have you done **for** me?"

"Everything! I did it all for you!" he shouted. "Every last thing! I killed that McLaggen idiot because he *dared* touch you; I killed Dumbledore because it would give me the freedom to take you; I gave you that ring because I'd rather spend my life with you than anyone else. Every. Last. Thing."

"The common denominator in every example you've given me is yourself," she snarled. 'You don't do anything unless it benefits you so don't you dare try to manipulate me into feeling ungrateful. You put this ring on me while I was *unconscious* so you could have a claim on me. You put spells on it so no one could mess with what is *yours*. You restrict my every move, lock every door so you won't lose me. You dress me to your tastes, you *fuck* me whenever you want to, however you want to.' Her fierce expression wavered. "No matter how many times I say no."

“And,” she continued, her voice growing stronger, ‘I never wanted you to do any of those things. Cormac was an idiot, but I never would have wanted him dead. You killed Dumbledore for the power it would give you. If you had acted like any normal person would when they like someone then you might not have had to go to such lengths. Relationships are built on trust and mutual respect between two consenting partners. *I never gave you any consent.* When I did, it was because you forced me to. You treat me more like an object than an actual person, and I wouldn’t trust you for a kingdom. And what about your precious Dark Lord?’ she added shrilly, eyes growing fevered. “You didn’t hesitate in killing the others, why didn’t you kill him too? He touched me, you know he did.” Her voice was ragged and high, her eyes shined in the low light with desperation and hatred that made him ache in anger. “You let him, that’s why!”

“Hermione, you don’t under—”

“I understand that you’re too big a coward to stand up to him!” she hissed. “You say that I belong to you and you’d never share me with anyone else. Well how does it feel to have shared me with your Master?”

Finished at last with what she had to say she looked up to see his head hung low and his shoulders had dropped. Guilt showed in the lines on his face, but there was anger in the way his fists were clenched at his sides.

“I couldn’t stop him,” he began.

“You mean you *wouldn’t*,” Hermione corrected angrily.

“I couldn’t because I was the one who suggested the idea of interrogating you in the first place,” he said, and she froze. “I would be branded as a traitor if I didn’t allow for you to be questioned. They’d think I’d turned sides. He would have been furious if I had refused for you to see him.”

“Oh, I’m so very sorry your questionable reputation could have been tarnished further!”

“He would have killed my parents. He would have killed *you*. I couldn’t let that happen, Hermione, I couldn’t.”

You should have, she wanted to say.

“I didn’t know—” his lie was interrupted by her ferocious glare, “I didn’t *think* he would touch you. I know he’s done it before with other prisoners but never with someone like...”

“Me. A Mudblood like me.”

He hurried to her and grasped her hands in his, bringing them to rest against his chest.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry I put you in danger like that and I promise it won’t happen again. I won’t let him touch you again, I swear it.”

Hermione looked at their joined hands on his chest and then looked at him coolly.

“You don’t think I’m in any danger here with you?”

“Of course not,” he said almost arrogantly, scoffing. “I will always take care of you.”

A shudder ran through her and she longed to pull her hands away from his body but he held her too tightly. More questions popped up in her head that she desperately wanted to ask but doing so would only raise his suspicion.

And...

An idea was beginning to form in her mind; one that was so terrible and yet so sweet, but it frightened her so much she shut her eyes and willed it away quickly, irrationally fearing that he would somehow know what just occurred to her.

He shifted and his cold lips pressed sweetly against her forehead.

"I love you," he breathed. He said it so quietly that she had almost imagined she had heard it, but seconds later it replayed in her head and she realized it unfortunately was not a trick of her mind. Horror flooded through her and she pulled away instantly, stumbling over herself in her haste to get as far away from him as possible.

"No," she whispered. "No, you don't."

"Oh, yes I do," he said calmly. "I love you, Hermione."

The tears had begun to spill again, her mouth gaped and her lips moved like she wanted to speak but no sound came forth. Draco wanted to shake her.

He strode to where she stood, not caring that he was stepping on shards of glass that were now cutting and digging into his flesh, sending little bolts of pain up his legs but he didn't care. She backed away quickly but only succeeded in pressing herself against the wall. He cornered her and gripped her arms tightly so that she gasped and struggled to break free.

"I know my actions have been inexcusable. I know I have hurt you. This is not an apology because know I will continue to hurt you." He leaned in close, brushed his lips against her cheek. "I can't help myself. I had to have you and I have to keep you. Perhaps in time, you could learn to love me too."

"Never," she whispered, turning her head away.

His eyes bored into her like he was trying to strip her soul. She could feel his breath against her cheek. There was ice running through her veins, raising every hair on her body, tensing every nerve. More than anything she wanted to look away, to flee, but his shocking wintry gaze held her in place like a permanent sticking charm.

Don't let him get any closer!

Hermione pushed out her palms, holding him back as effectively as she could but he was strong, and her weak little wings bent easily under his force.

"Whatever you feel for me, it isn't love," she whispered, bracing herself as his jaw clenched. "You don't even know what love is. You think owning someone is equivalent to love, that keeping me here will magically make me fall in love with you. I have news for you, Malfoy: You could bring me the moon or the sun or all the stars in the universe and I would feel the same. You could gift me all the books in the world or even set me free, you could rewind time so that none of this had ever happened and yet I still would never love you."

Malfoy looked at her with curiously shiny eyes. He was angry again-Hermione felt her stomach drop. She'd gone too far.

"I haven't need of your love as long as you're mine," he said. "There are ways for making you love me, remember?" Pale eyes glinted with malicious intent and she swallowed hard. Of course she remembered. His hand traveled up to cup her chin, the tips of his thumb grazed against her trembling mouth.

"Kill me," she whispered. "Kill me, and be done with it."

"Oh, little bird," he chuckled and the sound resonated low in his throat as he leant forward to kiss her clavicle, dragging his lips over her skin. "Why would you wish that?" He forcefully pushed her to the ground, she landed on her back with an 'oof' and he was on top of her within seconds, feverishly removing his clothes. Her pupils shrank, she tried pushing him off.

"It would make me happy," she whispered as he began to remove her gown. Hermione tried keeping it on but he pulled it off her roughly and she was left naked and cold with fear.

"Don't be silly," he growled, forcing her legs apart and pushing his fingers inside of her, beginning to pump quite roughly. The intrusion was unpleasant; she already felt sore and uncomfortable, trying to kick him away with her legs, but when he began to circle and pinch her clit she felt herself becoming aroused despite her best efforts to displace herself from the situation at hand.

It isn't fair, it isn't fair...

"Don't," she pleaded, trying to push him away. "Please!"

It's tearing me apart...

"Surrender to me," he hissed, curling his fingers inside of her. Her walls clamped down on him and when he felt her pleasure slick around his fingers he grinned malevolently and pumped faster. She was twisting underneath him, beads of sweat adorned her body and he licked off the ones he could reach, savoring her taste.

She was becoming unresponsive, to his frustration. There was a vacant, glassy look in her eyes, but though she had stopped resisting he found her willing enough where he wanted her to be. He bent forward and caught her nipple in his mouth, flicking at it with his tongue before sucking roughly, and the pleasure it gave her was so intense that without realizing it she threw back her head, giving him better access to her neck which he gladly began to ravish. Her face was flushed, eyes closed, brows arched in pleasure but her lips trembled with the effort she exerted to keep them shut. Draco continued the assault, knowing she was having trouble isolating herself from what was happening. Occasionally her mouth opened and a fragment of a moan would fly out to kiss his ears but just as quickly as it had happened, she would bite at them to keep the sounds locked inside. Brown eyes flew open and met shining silver and she turned her head away in shame, blushing fiercely.

"You can turn that pretty head away all you want, you can hate me for as long as you like, but never forget that I am your husband, and you belong to *me*."

"This," he said, running his hands over her body, "is *mine*." The force and speed in which he thrust his fingers inside her increased and she let out a long, shaky breath as stars began to

gather behind the backs of her eyes. Her entire body was lit in flames that coursed through her, curling her toes and fingers and making her hips push up into his hand. It was devastating; she was sure her body would never feel like it was her own anymore. Draco fisted a handful of her curls and pulled her in for a passionate kiss she did not reciprocate.

By now the squelching sound of his fingers in her moist sex was quite audible, making her clench her teeth in shame and rough pad of his thumb rubbed and flicked at her clit relentlessly, making her whole body tense tightly before she broke apart with a choked cry. She fought the intense waves of pleasure that consumed her but in the end she was drowned in their power. It took her several seconds to come back together but when she did she found him with his mouth attached to her breast, doing horrible, wonderful things that made her whole body tense. His fingers had not stopped their violation of her sex, still pushing in and out and touching that spot that repeatedly made her lose all the breath she had left. Before she knew it she fell apart again, her body convulsing while she clung to the carpet beneath her because she would not, *would not*, hold him and she felt like her soul was being ripped out of her own body. He pulled his fingers out of her with a rather wet sounding *smack* and licked her juices off his fingers, moaning hoarsely. She panted heavily as her world came to rights, refusing to open her eyes and look into those smug demon eyes, felt herself come back to rights as her thoughts returned to her. The complete and utter disgust she felt almost made her gag.

...isn't fair...

"I hate you."

He laughed, his hands travelling up to cup her breasts gently. "Your body says otherwise, sweetling." As if to emphasize his point, he pressed a kiss to one breast while he squeezed the other. His lips parted and took her already hardened nipple into his mouth, flicking at it with his tongue. Hermione pushed him away angrily.

"Regardless of what my body says, I said no," she said. "You cannot pretend that means nothing."

Just as she tried to haul herself away from underneath him he caught her and flipped her over onto her stomach quite easily. Her hair draped over her face with the movement, many strands catching in her open mouth. Spluttering, she began to spit them out. Instead, his grip on her hips tightened as he raised them in the air, forcing her onto her hands and knees, muttered a charm to keep her in place. Hermione fought to stand back up, to move away, and couldn't. She let her head drop, suddenly drained. Malfoy did not release her.

"Stop," she pleaded.

"Your words mean everything to me," Draco said quietly, placing his palm onto her lower back. "They always have. But I've told you before and I'll remind you now that I will not be denied."

"What are you—" her query was interrupted and followed by a loud shriek as he rammed himself into her from behind. A long, pleased hiss escaped him, and fisting a few thick strands of her curls in his hand, he began to pound. He was using quite a bit of force; her body involuntarily bounced back against his with the force of his movements, with each hard stroke he tugged her head back a little and she would release a series of little pants and yelps

that sent little sparks running through his body. Her breasts swung forward and backward with the force of his thrusts and he groaned as her walls tightened around his cock, greedily drawing him in further and further. With a hiss he came, his seed coming out in large spurts as she collapsed underneath him, breathing heavily.

Before he could do anything else, Hermione pulled herself out of his grip and stood. She hugged herself, trying to suppress her shaking. Draco, still flushed from his orgasm, watched as she picked up her gown and pulled it on, but just as she began to exit the room he stopped her, angry again.

“Where are you going?” he asked, fuming.

“You’ve made your ineffectual point,” she said. “I want to be alone now.”

He pulled her back to him. “We’re not done until I say so. I meant what I said.”

Hermione scoffed. “I’m sure you did, Draco, but we each have a different understanding of what love is. That being said, I don’t particularly care for yours.”

Draco struck her, hard enough that she lost balance and fell to the floor with a cry of pain.

“Watch your words, Hermione. I’ve given you all and I could take it all away just as easily.”

“So why don’t you?” she challenged him. “I’ll never give you what you want. You might as well kill me, you’ve damaged me enough.”

“No,” he said. “I want you alive. You’re no good to anyone dead.” The second the words left his mouth he realized he’d said too much.

Hermione considered him for a moment. Her face was beginning to bruise.

“What are you using me for, Draco?”

He said nothing, and after a heavy silence she left the room.

Hermione wanted to scream in frustration when she saw Blaise coming towards her in the hallway. After the nightmarish events of mere moments ago all she wanted was to be left alone! What could he possibly want?

“Lo, Granger,” he said upon reaching her at last.

“If you’re looking for Draco he’s in the library,” she said, and made to keep walking until he stepped in front of her path. Tired, emotionally wrecked and angry, Hermione scowled at him.

“What do you want?” she asked. He was staring at her cheek, and she touched it gingerly, having forgotten that Draco had hit her there.

“He’s done this before, hasn’t he?” Blaise’s voice was quiet.

“—yes.”

“Are you well? Do you need anything?”

She scoffed at his question.

"I've known Draco all my life. Short-tempered sod, he is, but I never knew him to hit a girl; his mother taught him better than that. Usually, if he was angry he'd take it out on the Quidditch field, or hell, a wall. But never this."

"Don't try to convince me he's really insecure and soft-hearted deep down," Hermione snapped. "Every day that passes he proves to me otherwise."

Blaise shook his head. "That's not what I'm trying to say. Draco was never a nice person, not truly. But since you came along he's turned worse." He trailed off for a moment his eyes fixed on the patch of blue and purple. "It's like I barely know him anymore."

"I'm sorry to have come between your friendship," she said sarcastically. "Believe me, that was the last of my intentions."

"That isn't what I meant," he said. "It's just-when I brought up the idea of him asking for you it was just a joke. It was an off comment. I swear I didn't-... Then he turned out to be dead serious about you and he made me swear to help-I had no other choice-I knew too much and not supporting him would have brought hell's flames over me. I thought it was just a mad fancy on his part, just a fantasy, that it would end quickly. Then he started taking it farther and farther and I don't know how much remains of the Draco I was friends with."

Hermione watched him suspiciously. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I didn't think it would all come to this," he said, his voice full of regret. "I feel I'm the reason you're here. He keeps me from seeing and talking to you too often, or I'd have told you sooner."

Hermione shook her head, feeling disoriented.

"You blame yourself for what he's done to me?"

"This all happened because of one stupid comment I made, Granger. I gave him the idea. You should hate me as much as you hate him."

Without warning her fist planted itself in his stomach. Blaise grunted and staggered backward, gasping for breath against the wall.

"Yes, like that," he said, wincing.

She hit him again, in the chest. One fist and then the other, again and again. Blaise limited his defense and took it, groaning when she reached too high and caught him in the cheek-his jaw caught and he bit his tongue. He gasped, spat quite a bit blood onto the floor, his body throbbing with pain. His lungs felt oddly weak.

The sight of the blood had frozen her. During the assault she had looked as wild as an untamed creature but now looked absolutely stricken.

"Oh, Gods," she whispered, her hands over her mouth. Her face was a mess of tears. She knelt beside him.

"I imagine he doesn't let you do that often," Blaise said hoarsely.

"No."

"I can see why."

A hysteric giggle escaped past her hands.

"I'm so sorry," she said, "I was so angry-I don't know why—"

"Considering the stress you've undoubtedly been under, you probably needed to let it out," he said, touching his lip tenderly, blood dribbling down his chin.

Without thinking Hermione placed her hand on his to move it aside and see what damage she had caused.

A bolt of pain ran down her arm, so quick and fierce she gasped and jerked away.

"What the fuck was that?" Blaise asked, frowning.

The ring flashed brightly on her finger. Hermione wrapped her arms around herself. She had forgotten. Did Draco know what had happened?

"He keeps me from touching others," she said softly. "Specifically other men."

Tears slid down her face. She wiped at them silently.

Blaise stared at her, aghast.

"I can't heal you, either," she said, her voice so dull it made Blaise shiver. "I wish I could. But he won't even let me use magic." At the end her voice broke but she acted like it had not happened.

"I don't blame you at all for any of this," she said. "He likely would have done it anyways without your suggestion, and I believe that you didn't truly intend for this to happen. I shouldn't have hit you either I was just so, so *tired* of not being able to fight back."

"You know he named me as your protector?" Blaise said suddenly. His eyes were fixed on the bruise, traveled down to the scars on her shoulder in the shape of Draco's bite. "That if you're *ever in danger* I should take care of you."

Hermione caught the meaningful look he sent her, and was suddenly dizzy with the rush of both absurd hope and suspicion that slammed into her.

He wants to help? He wants to help!

But as suddenly as it came it was gone. Paranoia won out and she narrowed her eyes at him. What a fool she was, falling for all this. She had remembered what happened the first time she encountered Blaise after her capture. She looked closer at his face to determine whether he was under an Imperius again, but he appeared as lucid as she felt.

Draco must have taught him a script then. Hermione stood and looked at him coldly.

"No. You can go and tell him I said no when he asks you later about what happened, just like last time."

She pushed past him and kept walking down the hall, fuming.

How dare he mock me like that? Does he think I'm so stupid as to fall for that again?

It stung to realize she already had.

There came the sound of rushed footsteps, then a hand caught her arm and she whirled around, trying not to shout from the pain emanating from the ring, expecting to see a furious Draco, but it was Blaise again.

"He doesn't know," he whispered anxiously. "I promise you, Granger. He doesn't know. Your friends are looking for you everywhere and I want to help."

He's telling the truth. The realization sent a flood of goosebumps down her arms.

"But... *why?*" she asked. "Why would you go behind his back to help me?"

"You deserve better than this, Granger. No one should have to live this way." He couldn't meet her eye.

"But... you're putting yourself in danger by helping me," she said, suddenly full of worry. "He would kill you. He told me, he'll kill anyone that tries to take me away."

"Bet he never thought it would be me," Blaise said. "But then I wouldn't doubt he would try to kill me anyway. The thing is, Granger, he doesn't know, and we have the advantage."

"But you can't ever return if you do this," Hermione said. "You must be aware of that. You would give it up to help me?"

"Didn't have much to begin with," he said, shrugging. 'Don't look so worried, Granger. I am fully aware of what I'm doing, and I know the consequences that come with my choice.' He paused, and a shameful look crossed his face. "I wish I had acted sooner."

"Thinking that will only depress you, believe me."

"Draco keeps us under a very close eye, Granger. Always keep that in mind. He trusts me well enough, but still not enough to let us alone in the same company for too long. I thought killing Dumbledore would have been the last of it, that Draco would have cooled off and calmed down but he's working himself into a frenzy now over you and Merlin knows what else. There's a lot he won't tell me, but I know he and the Dark Lord are working towards something, and whatever that is can't be any good for anyone, you especially."

"They're going after Harry," she said, turning pale. What else could it be?

"I'll track down Longbottom," he said. "He might be of help. I know you trust him."

Hermione didn't know what to say, so she nodded. Her throat seemed to not be working, so she mouthed a 'thank you', and he understood.

"We'll talk about this some other time. I'll be back sometime soon." He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze and left before she could squeeze back, but it didn't matter because the small touch had turned her hand numb for the brief second it lasted.

He was only a few paces away when he turned around and said, "Oh, and I forgot. Don't do anything stupid until then."

Hermione didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

She did both.

31. Break Me To Pieces

Disclaimer: I own nothing but the plot.

Chapter Thirty-Two: Break Me To Pieces

*“There’s no relief, I see you in my sleep
And everybody’s rushing me, but I can feel you touching me
There’s no release, I feel you in my dreams
Telling me I’m fine...”*

Dark Paradise-Lana Del Rey

Days passed, and more after that. Hermione tried to be brave, but the task of summoning her courage had never been so difficult before. This new hope was dangerous; it was intoxicating, and she tried hard not to let herself become too distracted by it. The glorious thought that she would soon be free was often in her mind, however, and she spent hours each day wondering what she would do once liberated.

Would she try to track down Harry and Ron? Would she go see her parents? Or would she head straight to the Burrow and take her place in the Order, and assist in any way she could?

All options were extremely appealing to her; and Hermione was torn in choosing one. But the days passed and Blaise was not seen nor heard from again, and she began to doubt.

Malfoy had shown no knowledge of their plans, but if there was one thing Hermione knew it was he was a brilliant liar. Though she very much wanted to she dared not ask after his friend lest his suspicions be aroused, so Hermione agonized each day and waited for the man who would take her to freedom. However, at one point she realized she was being too obvious-Malfoy had noticed her anxiousness. The only thing that kept her from panicking was the knowledge that he dismissed her attitudes as to her usual ones, and paid her no mind. This was close enough-Hermione would not have him spoil her life any longer, so when she suspected he was trying to enter her mind she instantly called forth memories of herself and Harry and sometimes Ronald and Neville. This would distract him from her true thoughts, just as Voldemort had been by the false memories she had created that hid her knowledge of the existence of the Horcruxes.

Distract him indeed they did, though not in the way she had thought. The memories protected her, but not from his jealousy. This, coupled with their strange talk the other night when he had confessed his love for her, resulted in the forced consumption of more

Amortentia. The doses were the regular amount but given more frequently, and Hermione began to feel the dangers of the love potion.

She had tried to warn him. For weeks she had tried, when it first started, but he didn't listen.

He never does, she thought. And perhaps for once it will work to my advantage, but not for this.

The changes were small, but Hermione noticed everything.

Amortentia was illegal for a reason. If the maker wanted, they could brew it so the potion could slip into the taker's mind and will and lie there, dormant but persuasive when activated. The lesser harmful version was the kind Fred and George sold in their shop, the kind that gave the taker a mad fancy to the giver but faded quickly and left no trace. The kind she'd been given the day before was stronger, more potent, and designed to last. There'd been cases she'd read of in books in the Restricted Section where actual victims had been turned into 'willing' lovers, controlled by the remnants the potion left in their minds, and she was without a doubt that this was what Draco aimed for. It was horrifying to think she might become one of those cases too.

Each time the potion wore off and the heavy fog lifted from her mind it was a little harder for her to return to her true self. It was unnerving, though she was able to make her way back each time felt a little harder, like the potion was making her weak. Again; the changes were small but Hermione felt that if taken for long enough (and frequently enough) soon the task would prove too difficult and what would happen then? Though she couldn't feel it she was quite sure the potion was leaving bits of the 'fake' Hermione behind each time, to one day be a complete, false version of her that was irreversibly attached to Draco.

This, she promised herself, could not happen. It would be her worst fear come true; to be imprisoned inside her own mind and body, which magic had taken away from her.

Draco didn't know. Or maybe he did, she wasn't sure. It was clear he loved it when she fought back, when she resisted. He claimed to love her sharp tongue, her courage and fierceness, but all this and more was what the potion was taking away. If he noticed it appeared he didn't mind.

He's getting the love he craves, she thought bitterly. So why would he stop? With the potion he gets everything I would never give him without it.

I have to tell him. This can't happen. I can't let him do this to me. I can't, I can't.

So she waited for the right time to tell him, but it wasn't coming. Entire days were spent under the influence of the potion and when she 'awoke' he was gone, either summoned by Voldemort or locked in his study. Hermione didn't have to think twice why he was avoiding her.

He's still angry at me for what I said.

Normally Hermione would have been relieved, but with this new threat looming overhead Hermione was just the opposite. This was eating away at her, and coupled with everything else she had gone through Hermione began to fear for her sanity. Any word Draco spoke grated on her. When he opened his mouth she immediately deafened herself to his voice and

became irritable. Whenever he was in her presence Hermione wanted nothing more than to be far, far away, to shout at him and set the whole damned place on fire. Every time she felt his eyes on her she wanted to run to him and claw them out until nothing remained but gaping black holes. She felt his gaze constantly and it was slowly driving her mad, the way he unfailingly watched her day after day after day; studying her, loving her with his eyes. The feel of his hands on her alone made her want to cry until she was nothing but a dried up husk of a human body. Perhaps if she were a puddle of salt tears he would leave her alone.

These months she had spent here, in captivity, were the loneliest of her life. The only people she had seen were the Malfoys and Blaise, and not very often at that. Hermione spoke little, and preferred not to speak at all, but Draco would not have it. Sometimes he'd forced her to talk to him through the Imperius Curse, and she was sure she was talking enough under the love potion, but for all the good that did her she might never have said anything at all.

Draco kept her in his tightly closed fist, like a dog loathe letting go of its favorite toy. When he smiled, there was a triumphant push to his lips, a smug set to his eyelids that infuriated her beyond reason. The arrogant, lustful look in his eyes that pierced her as he moved inside her was enough to make her wither away deep inside.

She was losing herself. Draco was taking all his favorite aspects of her for himself, one by one and keeping them like little trophies, and there was nothing Hermione could do to stop it. Except one thing.

Escaping was her only option, the only one she cared to act upon, and she *knew* it was the time to do something. The news of Harry and Ron's breaking into the wizarding bank had reached her at last, and it was the motivation she hadn't known she needed to get out. She had been outraged and amazed at their stupidity, their genius at having accomplished what they were after and not having been caught. She dearly wanted to know how they had done it. If they had risked all to do something of that magnitude, then it surely meant the great battle was near.

And they need me.

Words were not enough to express how proud she was of them for having gotten so far. Knowing they were still alive and relatively unhurt made her feel heady with relief-she had spent so long worrying about them this news was better than any pain relief potion.

They needed her, and she needed them. This was all she knew. Her legs felt twitchy and her whole body seemed to hum with a restless energy that was quickly becoming too much to bear. The need to run, to take action had her strung tighter than a piano wire; every small noise made her jump, every shadow was Draco come to punish her for her disobedience.

Her thoughts shifted to Blaise again, and Hermione rubbed her knuckles against the edge of the table beside her.

Once the initial surprise of Blaise's offer had faded, Hermione found herself doubtful again. She had nothing but his word to go on, and Draco's silence. Normally that would not be enough but what else did she have? Trusting Blaise was her only option.

"You deserve better, Granger." A crease formed between her brows.

He had sounded convincing enough, but Hermione was sure the Slytherin had other reasons for helping her. They had hardly interacted in the many years they'd known each other, and now he was helping her because she deserved better? It didn't make sense to Hermione, but she would be a fool indeed if she didn't accept his help.

Then there was what Draco had told her.

"You're no good to anyone dead."

He had all but confirmed he was using her for something other than his sick pleasure. His choice of words was peculiar enough. 'Anyone.' He didn't say 'me,' he said 'anyone'.

What could he mean? What is he planning?

It was unfair that he knew so much about her. This was no way to live, being kept here like a useless bird in a cage, while its owner cooed and prodded at her for a song or a trick. This cage kept her immobile while he came and went, seeing his precious Dark Lord and whomever else he wanted. What did she know about him? For every small thing she learned about her captor he seemed to have learned ten more about her.

Speaking of which...

Bringing her hand to her lap, Hermione studied the ring. She had been surprised it had not gone off when he'd touched her. Alarm bells had gone off in her head and she had braced herself for the worst, but nothing had happened. And then Blaise had told her he was her protector.

That annoyed her, the fact that Draco thought she needed protection.

Take your bloody ring back and give me my wand and you'll be the one needing protection.

All the same, it was his arrogance that would prove to be his great failure. Hermione began to laugh.

You think you're so smart, don't you? The Great Draco Malfoy. Wait until you see what's coming.

The day wore long, but at last Draco returned to find his wife dozing on the chaise in the living room. The fading light streaming in from the windows hit her in such a way as to soften her appearance; her form, which had grown gaunt of late, seemed almost blurred. She had not bothered to dress for the day, still clad in the pale blue nightgown she'd worn the night before. Draco crept forwards quietly and lifted her into his arms before moving to a larger seat that would accommodate them both. Though he had been careful in his movements she had woken anyway and watched him passively as he sat, bringing her down with him.

"I'm sorry I woke you."

Hermione did not answer him. All she did was look at the window, no expression on her face. Draco's hand ran down the length of her arm, then her leg. Such smooth, warm skin she

had. A few times he squeezed lightly to confirm his suspicions. She was growing much too thin.

"I dreamt of you," came her voice, quiet as sifting sand.

"Was it a good dream, little bird?" His lips rubbed against her shoulder.

"I killed you."

Draco wasn't quite sure what to make of this. Wouldn't that mean it was a good dream-for her at least? Was he imaging the horror in her voice? Did the idea of him being dead truly upset her? Or was she only upset at realizing she, the golden heart of the light side could be just as dark as him?

Catching her chin in his grip, he turned her to face him.

"How did it make you feel?"

A battle raged in her eyes for a delicious second or two before she met his curious gaze defiantly.

"I am not a killer," she said. "I am not like you."

Draco's mouth curled into a smile, and he watched her with sparkling eyes.

"For the present, I presume you're right, my love. We'll see what the future holds for your declaration."

She frowned. "What are you implying?"

Rather than answer her, Draco rose up off the seat, causing her to tumble back down onto it and headed to the window to shut the drapes.

The sun had set and darkness was unfolding over the sky. Rain was coming. The drapes felt heavy and stiff in his hands as he pulled them together, and he briefly thought of the feel of her skin before turning away and walking back.

She seemed lost in thought; standing there silently with her hands worrying a strand of hair that had fallen over her shoulder.

She was not startled when his fingers wound around her arms and his hands slid upwards to form a ring around her neck, the tips of his fingers brushing against her collarbone. Draco pressed into her from behind, his nose and lips grazing against her ear, and he sighed softly into her hair.

All the while she stood still as a statue; eyes didn't so much as flicker, she never shied away and her body did not shudder under his touch.

And yet...

There it was, that fluttering pulse that never failed him. From underneath the hollow of her throat it seemed to jump to meet his touch, thrumming between their pressed flesh.

"An effect of the potion," she murmured, knowing his thoughts.

Draco frowned. Unless he'd forgotten, he had not given her the love drink that day.

“How do you mean?”

“It’s changing me,” she said, and there was a weakness in her voice that held him. “It frightens me, Draco. Every time you make me drink it I’m left different somehow.”

“Different how?” he asked, his hold around her neck tightening ever so slightly.

Frail, shaking fingers ghosted over his, then pressed more firmly into her flesh, and they both felt her erratic heartbeat. “Like this.”

Silence followed. Her hand fell away from his and she bit her lip to keep it from trembling, wishing he would just understand already so she would not have to say what was coming next.

He knew. It had dawned on him the second she put her hand on his and a thousand screaming thoughts filled his head before he pushed them all away.

He knew, but she had to say it. He wanted her to say it.

Unable to bear his silence, Hermione took a small breath.

“The potion-it takes control over my mind and body and pushes me somewhere else.” Her face twisted in distress. ‘I can *feel* what it leaves behind. I think over time if I keep taking it it’s going to keep replacing parts of me and it frightens me so much. I won’t be the same anymore.’ She suppressed a small sob. “Please don’t make me take it anymore, *please*.”

It felt utterly humiliating to be reduced to begging to keep herself, to keep her sanity. The ache in her chest had returned full force, and Hermione found it difficult to breathe. Her hands were so cold and stiff; she raised them to her chest. The strangest impulse beckoned her to lay her hands over his where they were but she jerked her hands down again in fear.

His hands were still around her neck.

“What else?”

“It makes me *want* you,” she whispered, anguished. “Even when I haven’t taken it!”

She was whirled around suddenly and his lips were on hers, pressing, crushing, loving. Hermione cried out in protest, feeling her heart sink in dismay upon finding her hands clutching at his back, pressing him to her. There was an alien urge in her to kiss back, to hold him and let her lips claim his but just as fierce as the urge was her despair was greater and Hermione shut down.

Still, his lips ravaged all they touched, ignorant of her rejection.

“Give in,” he urged her. “See what it’s like, Hermione.”

“No, please.”

He growled and snatched her hands up around his neck. Unbidden, they latched on, and caressed his hot skin. Hermione felt a heat grow inside her and she began to cry more

earnestly. She was losing control. She tried pulling her hands back but they seemed to have minds of their own. Her own mind was rapidly becoming muddled.

Her voice came out ragged. “Don’t make me do this, Draco. Don’t.”

“Let it guide you,” he said between kisses. His hands were under her nightgown.

“It’s not guiding me, it’s controlling me!” Hermione shouted, and tore herself away at last. She was shaking so much she had to hold herself against the wall for support. The desire in his eyes had gone and now he stared at her coldly.

“Then *let* it control you,” he said.

“No!” He went to her and she knocked his hands away, wild-eyed. “You’ve taken everything from me, *everything*. Now you want to take *me*, too! I’m not a fucking doll! If you want love so badly you should have stayed with your mummy instead of wasting your time with me. Did she know what a monster her ‘petit garçon’ grew up to be?”

A second later she was on the floor, convulsing from the strength of his Crucio. Her screams filled the lonely Manor and rang inside her own head, threatening to split it apart. Her legs jerked around and her jaw snapped shut. There was blood in her mouth but she couldn’t spit it out because her teeth were grinding together to keep the screams inside. The ache in her chest was magnified to a thousand, her own heart spasmed and her back arched, between her legs felt like the first time he had raped her again but intensified and every movement set her flesh ablaze. Her arms clawed at her middle, where it felt like boiling oil had been poured onto it. It was a million different kinds of pain that wracked her all at once and it hurt more than anything she’d experienced so far she just wished he would say the two words that would cease all her suffering.

But after what seemed like an eternity of the mindless pain it was over, and she was left barely able to breathe on the floor. She lay there for a minute, crying with her hands covering her eyes, waiting for the next dose of torture, waiting for her head and heart to stop pounding. The pain was forefront in her mind; she had even forgotten who had unleashed it onto her until she felt him crouch down beside her.

A hand gripped her wrist and instinct took over. Unable to even utter a sound of distress, Hermione flailed wildly and tried to get away but he held her too tight. She raked at his hand, leaving bloody trails of ruined skin and still he held on as she thrashed around under him.

A low voice hissed into her ear. “Don’t you *ever* speak like that about my mother again.”

The grip on her wrist tightened ’til she thought it would snap and she nodded quickly, eager to have him gone.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped. “Please—I’m-forgive me!”

The hand around her wrist retreated. But then he was carrying her again, and Hermione kicked and struggled with what little strength she had left but he did not let her go until they had reached his room and he set her down on the bed. Hermione groaned, and curled into a ball facing away from him. She had no strength left, she lay limp on the bed, mind dark and blank. She couldn’t bear to look at him.

There was a rustling of fabric as he undressed and then joined her on the bed, pulling her close. Hermione tensed herself, making herself as small as she could but his leg found its way between hers and his arms wrapped like vines around her.

They stayed that way for a long time. Hermione fell asleep briefly, and awoke with dampened eyes and stiff limbs, still weary from the torture curse. When she felt his arms around her she rolled around to face him. His arms wrapped back around her. His eyes were dark and open, he watched her without saying a word.

Hermione reached out to cup his cheek. Her lips trembled.

"My husband," she said, smiling. There was no happiness in it-it was the smiling grimace of one who tries to keep from bawling. "My precious husband."

There was no irony in her tone, nor hatred. She spoke the words simply, but in full awareness. "My mother would be so surprised... after everything I've told them about you. Her and my Father would insist something was wrong, they would ask if I was sure about you..."

"Shh," he was clearly uncomfortable, tried to persuade her to fall asleep again. Hermione kept on.

"I'd tell them I've never been happier," she said, voice wavering so badly she didn't recognize it. Her eyes were pools-overflowing and bright. The tears made her cheeks shine. "'I don't deserve him,' I'd say. 'He is gentle and respectful and caring and I feel safe with him always. I belong with him.'"

She traced his lips with her finger. He remained still, his eyes assessed her but his face remained blank.

"The girls that wanted you would be jealous. 'I want a love like that,' they'd say as they look at me and you. 'I want to be kissed like that,' 'I want someone to love me that much.' If they knew your price for such a love they'd hide their purses."

"I am so *lucky* that you are mine," she said, pulling her hand away, face crumpling. She felt so heavy, as if all her insides had turned to stone. His expression had not changed and she couldn't take it anymore so she turned around again with effort and moved to the farthest side of the bed. There she collapsed, let the rest of the tears fall. Her nose had gotten blocked up so she had to breathe through her mouth and it was embarrassing but she would not hide her misery. She was tired of crying in silence when he was asleep.

"How can you expect me to live like this?" she managed to say. "How could you *ever* want this?"

His hand, for once hesitant, touched her shoulder. She shoved it away. "**No**. I don't love you. I never will. If it weren't for this cursed ring I'd rip you to pieces with my bare hands so you could feel a fraction of what you've done to me. I'd send you howling to where you belong. *Get away.*"

He left the room shortly after. Hermione didn't care. She stayed, spent and weak, falling into a fitful sleep.

When she awoke the next morning he was with her again, arms wound around her. Hermione didn't move.

"Are you feeling well?" he asked.

"Yes." She felt dazed and stiff, as if she'd been asleep for weeks.

"That's good," he said, watching her carefully. "I had Bogg tend to you once you'd fallen asleep. You were a little hysteric, do you remember?"

Hermione frowned, closed her eyes. The last thing she remembered was their fight the night before. *I must have passed out after the Crucio.*

"No."

"You hit your head against the floor when I—" he paused.

"Cursed me."

"But you're all better now? You're sure?"

Her head was pounding. "Yes."

They lapsed into silence. Draco bent his head to kiss her shoulder, her neck. Hermione shuddered.

"I won't make you take the potion anymore," he said softly. "I want you for *you*, not what a potion gives me."

There was some relief, but Hermione could not feel it. Those hands held her breasts and he kissed the back of her neck.

"I will do this," he said, "but now I expect you to give me your love in return."

Hermione's breath caught in her throat.

"Give me your love freely, as well as you can," the hands at her breasts squeezed them softly, and then pressed them against her chest. Hermione felt her insides turn to ice, and yet there was soft sigh waiting to be released in the back of her throat. "I expect you to try. I know it cannot be easy for now, but perhaps one day that might change."

What have I done? She thought. *With one action he has saved me, and yet I am damned me all the same.*

Her throat was so dry; she cleared her throat weakly before speaking.

"You told me you loved me. If this is still true you would not ask this of me."

She could feel his grim smile against her neck. "Even '*monsters*' such as I grow lonely," he replied. "I would have your love, shall it be taken by force or given by you. The choice is yours."

The halls were silent, and yet they were full of sound. The walls around him seemed to vibrate with magic; he half expected them to tell him their secrets if he pressed his palms

against them. Each step he took made no sound but the whispers of the shadows made up for that, mumbling to him from the corners and the floors.

Blaise kept to the shadows faithfully, moving stealthily in the dark so as not to be discovered. Obsidian eyes took in everything around him; watching, waiting.

He's got to be there. There's no other place he could have gone.

The halls were full of voices, but he was the only one there. The shadows clung to him, holding him as a lover would, blending into the fabric of his robes, the dark tones of his skin. Blaise watched the door attentively; tense, ready to move should it open. When was the last time he'd gotten a full night's sleep? He couldn't quite remember. He was tired, in truth, but the elation of his realization kept him as alert as he needed to be. The door was plain enough- he didn't know what to expect inside, but was prepared for anything. If this was where Longbottom was hiding, then he would stay up all night every night until he got the chance to deliver his message.

Still, he couldn't quite shake the feeling he was wasting his time here. What was the point of telling Longbottom? He certainly wasn't going to bring Granger *here*. The castle was the worst place he could do so, in fact. The Battle was sure to happen here, and if word ever got out that he had been the one to help her escape he would never hear the end of it if she was killed. Not to mention the place was crawling with people who wouldn't hesitate to capture her and hand her back to Draco without hesitation. They all knew.

So why are you doing this?

In his mind's eye he could see Granger's suspicious look again. It had been so plain to see how badly she'd wanted to believe him, to trust him.

Should she?

Blaise wasn't sure. He meant her no ill will, that was sure. The poor girl was severely unlucky, but she had never caused harm to anyone. She hadn't asked for any of what Draco had done to her. Draco kept it all private but Blaise knew him well enough to guess. And those scars, the bruises didn't lie. He pictured them again and felt sick.

Perhaps he just had had enough of being Draco's middle man. None of this felt right. He felt sick with himself for the things he'd done already. Or perhaps he just had a soft spot for pretty girls. Paltry reasons, he was sure, but they were all he had.

Draco kept him under oath to remain loyal, which was why he was able to get this far without issue. Although drastically changed, Draco was still his closest friend, and though they often didn't quite agree on everything lately he still had Draco's best interests in mind. Blaise was not betraying Draco, he was merely *helping* him. Besides, Hermione had accepted-it wasn't like he was kidnapping her or anything. Meddlesome or not, it wasn't a question of if he would help Hermione or not. The longer she stayed with Draco the greater danger she was in.

This girl would ruin Draco, if she already hadn't done so. Ever since Draco had got involved with her things had turned out for the worse for all involved, including him. Not to mention Voldemort's sudden preferring Draco to all his other faithful Death Eaters. Blaise barely had a clue what was going on, but whatever it was it could not mean anything good to

anyone except Draco. Whatever it was they were planning, he wasn't sure he wanted to be a part of it. If he and Hermione wanted to get out it was the right time before the chance passed.

Perhaps, if he did this, everyone would stop sending jinxes at the back of his head every time he walked through the hall. The first few times were bad enough—he'd become a master at the Protego enchantment. But all the protective enchantments in the world couldn't save him from the dirty looks he got, from the refusal to be in his society unless they were of the same House, of the same mind. He knew he was somewhat deserving-small as it was, his role in the Headmaster's death was not forgotten or forgiven. Even though he'd been pardoned by the Ministry and welcomed back by Snape and McGonagall, there was hostility wherever he went.

Blaise didn't want to be a hero. He simply wanted to be left alone. He simply wanted his best friend back to normal (if he'd ever been normal at all) and Granger back with Potter, away from their side, where she belonged. The witch was nothing but trouble.

Draco would never forgive you for taking her away, though.

Would he? All because of some girl? Paltry indeed. But he had to know she would never give him what he wanted, why didn't he just accept that and let her go?

Blaise knew why. He's bloody obsessed with her. Fancies himself in love. A little time with her gone should have him thinking more clearly. They're not good for each other and frankly, it's remarkable how he doesn't see it. If he never forgives me then so be it but she shouldn't be kept here against her will. If he comes for me, and he will, I won't let him kill me.

There was a creak and he came to, watching eagerly as the door opened just a fraction, then wide enough to let someone through before shutting quickly. Blaise shrank back into the shadows, cast his Protego, and waited. At last, a quick step was heard and he pounced, slamming the person into the wall with his wand at their throat.

"What are you doing here?" Neville gasped, raising his wand, but Blaise knocked that away.

"Waiting for you, of course," Blaise said hushedly. "So rude of you to keep me waiting."

Neville glared at him. "You'll never get to the rest as long as someone else is still inside that room, Zabini. You're wasting your time." Seeing the wand aimed at his Adam's apple, Neville clenched his teeth. "Go on, get it over with. I won't tell you anything."

Blaise laughed. "I don't care about your little group of vagabonds, Longbottom. I've news."

"News of what?" Neville asked warily.

"The lioness is coming back. Soon. Try to reach Potter and tell him, if you can. Don't mention me."

It wasn't until after Longbottom had left that Blaise remembered the order from Draco to bring the Gryffindor to him.

That's for another day, then, he thought, and went off to sleep.

A/N:

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Not many chapters left! But there may or may not be a one-shot conclusion to this. The way this story ends will be one ending for those who want a happy-ish ending, and the one shot will be the true ending for those who are ok with it. I've been considering this for a while, but still am not sure if I'll go through with it or not. Cast your votes: Yes to the one-shot ending? Or would you rather have it all together here, but with a warning?

Almost done with the playlist! (And look for a link on my profile.)

Most frequently asked questions:

Will there be a happy ending? Yes and no. Mostly unhappy endings abound, sorry.

Will you write more stories after His Persephone? Yes, of course.

Will 'x' or 'x' die? There will be some deaths, but I'm not saying who.

32. Lie To Me Pt 2

Disclaimer: I own nothing.

IMPORTANT NEWS IN AUTHOR'S NOTE AT END OF CHAPTER. DO ME A SOLID AND READ IT.

Chapter Thirty-Three: Lie to Me Part Two

*“And if there’s anything I learned that would keep me standing,
If I take you at your word then I’m empty handed
A tongue like yours should be burned and branded,
So I can see you lie to me,
0-0-0
Look in my eyes when you say you love me
So I can see you lie to me.”
Lie to Me-Sara Bareilles*

The room was abound with colour-crescent shapes in every color, hanging in corners or from the ceiling. Sleeping pads lined the floor. Hammock or sleeping pad, each one hosted an exiled student, all who were currently asleep or merely pretending to be.

These were the students who had dared to speak up. Against Snape, against the others and their false teachings. When one was silenced another rose, but in the end they all ended up here. All of the DA was here, except its three founders and the three other Weaselys.

Neville didn’t bother to pretend to sleep. He rarely was able to sleep anymore, anyway, so he often sat in his hammock, planned things out, and waited. There was too much on his mind for him to be able to sleep comfortably.

Someone was snoring loudly nearby. It was an annoying sound that buzzed loudly in the back of his head, scattering his thoughts frequently. Neville wished he could find the guilty party and shut them up. That required energy, though, and at the moment all of his was focused on what was on his mind. For the time being, Neville cast a Silencio around himself and peace was had at last.

Luna was sleeping somewhere off to the right, in a purple hammock she'd strung with all sorts of peculiar knick-knacks and magical plants to ward away the creatures she spoke of so often. There were similar oddities attached to his. Neville's eyes sought her out, and found her asleep with her back to him so he saw nothing but her blanket and her long hair flowing down, reaching for the space below in soft waves.

Funny, he'd never before noticed how pretty her hair was. Almost as pale as a certain Slytherin's but golden rather than silver. It reminded him of a cloud in the morning sky, soft with the glowing rays of the sun.

'The Lioness is coming back.'

There could be no doubt as to whom Zabini meant.

But how? How had this come about? Not that he wasn't happy-happy was an understatement. But what if it was a trap of some sort? Could Zabini be trusted? Or did this mean Draco Malfoy was dead at last, or taken down somehow? Surely he would never relent to letting her go. How was Zabini going to be able to rescue her?

Neville frowned. So Zabini really had known where she was all along. If he had, why could he not have helped her sooner?

He chose to ignore the anger that rose inside him.

Save it for later, now isn't the time.

They practiced every day. Come morning, the scouts would be off to get their breakfast from Aberforth in the Hog's Head and the rest would push the sleeping pads to the side and clear the rest of the space while taking turns in the bathrooms freshening up. And then came the practice. Everything Harry had taught them and more from the books the room provided them.

Outside the room the Carrows and Filch and Snape prowled around in search of them, to capture them and send them off to no one knew where, to make an example of them.

They were unwanted, yes, but they would be prepared when Harry came. They would be ready when it was time to put it all to rest.

Hermione wasn't sure when exactly she had woken. Voices had pierced through her slumber and she was conscious again though her eyes had not opened. Her mind was slowly becoming alert as the voices kept on, and she realized upon shifting her head a little that she was not in bed. Two hands combed through her long hair slowly, feeling the thick curls between cold fingers. Her hair was gently pulled back from her scalp and her head was on his lap. The tiniest frown graced her features and dimly, she heard a soft '*ssh*' and fingertips smoothed her brow gently. Hermione turned her head away to the side, still reluctant to wake, and sighed.

"You're not even listening to me," she heard someone complain. In her tiredness it took her a moment to figure to whom the voice belonged but once she realized it was Blaise, Hermione was completely awake instantly. Her eyes nearly flew open but Hermione kept them shut and made sure her breathing was deep and slow. Draco's hands continued playing

with her hair, and she let him. *Better my hair than other parts of me.* She wondered if he knew she had woken. What was she doing here?

Oh, that's right. I fell asleep here after breakfast. Draco must have moved her a little to place her head and shoulders in his lap, and Blaise must have found them like this.

"I always listen to you, Blaise," came Draco's murmur, soft and distracted. His hands remained focused in adoring her hair.

"Not right now, you're not," Blaise sounded annoyed. 'Couldn't you forget about her for one minute?'

There was a long silence. Hermione could well imagine the threatening look Draco shot at Blaise. The hand was back on her cheek, the thumb grazing against her bottom lip. "Say what you came here to say, Zabini."

There was a sigh. "Longbottom is hiding out in the Room of Requirement. Only I know. Would have told Snape as well, but I don't think you'd have wanted that."

"Of course not. Longbottom is mine. Smoke him out, I don't care how. I don't care about the others, either. Let them go or capture them all. The room is of utmost importance. No one else must enter."

Hermione frowned again. *Why?*

Blaise asked the same. "There are other rooms we could use. Why that one in particular? It is already difficult enough to get into."

"It is the Dark Lord's wish," Draco said. "There is an item of extreme importance to him there, one he will retrieve later."

"What is it?"

"Some tiara," Draco said dismissively. Carefully, he tugged on a lock of her hair, sharper than she would have liked and Hermione struggled not to open her eyes. "A diadem, he called it."

Diadem... why does that sound so familiar? Her heart beat quickened and she knew she was onto something... If only she could remember where she had heard that word before...

They continued their conversation, moving on to another topic but Hermione didn't hear a word of it. A plan formed in her mind, and she was eager to start, but now was not the time. If she started now he would be suspicious. So Hermione cleared her mind and slowly let herself drift off into sleep again, though there was nothing more she wanted than to run to Blaise and have him take her home in that instant. But, she reasoned, if Blaise had something he wanted to tell her he would find a way how. It was simply too dangerous now, with Draco there. The voices of the two wizards faded after a time and she was asleep once more. His hands remained in her hair.

"Hogsmeade? Are you sure?" Ron asked.

“There’s no other way. It’s closest to Hogwarts and we need to get an idea of how bad it is over there.”

Ron nodded. “When do we leave?” He didn’t know why he’d bothered asking, he already knew the answer.

Harry rose from his seat and with a sense of urgency began to pack their meager belongings.

“Tomorrow.”

When she awoke she was alone. This time she was awake instantly, and the first thing she did was make sure she was absolutely alone before hastening over to the library. There was an excitement in her she had not felt in a long time, and she found herself almost smiling as she pushed the doors open and made her way over to a certain shelf.

The last time Draco had had her read to him this was the shelf she’d picked a book out of, and had glimpsed a copy of *Hogwarts, a History*. She didn’t dare go near it then, for she knew it was his way of tempting her, and she would not have it.

But it was necessary now, so with a furtive glance around the room Hermione snatched the book out of its place and made a dash for a more secluded spot in the room.

How good it felt to read something familiar again! But there was no time to go over the beautiful illustrations or the passages she liked best. There was something she was after.

It didn’t take long to find it. By fortune of knowing the book nearly by heart, she opened it on the right chapter, but it took a bit of scanning around to find the picture she was looking for.

That’s it.

The illustration she’d seen over a thousand times yet never really paid much attention to. A handsomely detailed diadem drawn in black ink, with the eagle of Ravenclaw made of silver on the crown.

Hermione felt almost dizzy; her mind was racing so. It had been some time since she had felt this excited, and unchecked, her thoughts sped on.

It has to be a Horcrux, it has to be. Why else would that vile snake be so interested in it? They had figured out the cup, and the locket. The diary and the ring were done with. For all she knew, so were the locket and the cup. If Harry and Ron had successfully broken in and out of Gringotts then she was willing to bet her life they had the cup.

Armed with this knowledge, Hermione rushed to return the book and exit the room. Making an effort to calm herself and conceal the memory inside her mind, Hermione began to look for Draco. It was strange indeed that he had let her alone for so long, even if she’d been asleep for most of the day. The prospect of him being away for the rest of the night cheered her, and she went down to the kitchens to get something warm to drink.

However, upon entering the kitchens she encountered just the man she'd hoped to avoid, and her cheerful mood vaporized.

As if he'd known her cravings, he smiled at her and offered her to drink from his cup. She didn't move, and he cracked a smile.

"There's nothing in it, Hermione. I promise." When she still didn't respond Draco emptied the cup into the sink, refilled it, and offered it to her once more.

Hermione took it without thanking him, and drank cautiously.

"I was wondering when you would wake," he said, taking one of her hands in both of his, drawing her closer. "You're not feeling ill, I hope?"

Hermione shook her head, holding the cup and his hand stiffly.

"Are you hungry?"

She shook her head.

His face turned serious. "You haven't eaten anything since breakfast," he said, and pushed a plate towards her, which instantly filled with food. Hermione absently thought of Bogg slaving away in the kitchen for a meal she didn't feel like eating.

Before she knew it she was sitting next to him holding a fork in her hand and he had summoned himself more tea, which he drank slowly as he watched her eat.

Hermione forced it all down though she wasn't hungry. At least, her mind thought she wasn't hungry because her stomach received the food well, and soon her plate was empty. Draco offered her more tea and she drank it, wondering what prompted this behavior. He was being kind to her, ignoring her earlier rudeness. It made her slightly uneasy.

As soon as she put down the fork her plate vanished, and Draco stretched, not bothering to stifle a yawn.

Hermione stood, not knowing what to do next. Should she thank him?

She did so, tepidly.

He nodded, and stepped towards her, assessing her carefully. His head dipped down to hers and she tried to turn away but his hands cupped her head; stopped her from denying him.

"I care about you, Hermione. I truly do."

Taken aback by this sudden confession, Hermione didn't know how to reply-she avoided his gaze.

He came closer, and held the back of her head with one hand while the other pulled her in so there was no space between them, and pressed his lips to hers.

Hermione flinched. She had not forgotten what he'd done to her the night before, and though he'd made sure she was not permanently injured by it the ghost of the terror and pain remained. Suddenly her head hurt, her skin crawled as he kissed her, and she hoped with all her might it was just a kiss he wanted and nothing more.

He pulled away and relieved, Hermione let out the breath she had been holding in.

“Let’s take a walk,” Draco said, and without waiting for Hermione to agree he pulled her along with him out the door, and suddenly they were in the dark.

The night was perfectly still; the snow was long gone and in its place the green of the earth had become alive again. Hermione could hear the rustling of the grass and the faint scent of the lavender was carried to her on whisper of a breeze.

They walked in the direction of the lavender field, but Hermione could barely put one foot in front of the other.

No, she thought. She was dumbfounded-could it be?

But the evidence was all around her. When she had arrived here Winter was just beginning, and now it was all green again. How had she not noticed this before, the last time he had let her out? How could she have been so stupid?

Her voice came out the opposite of how she wanted to sound-it came out weak, horrified.

“Draco-what month are we in?”

There was a pause, and she feared he would not answer her, but at last, with a tight jaw he replied, “May.”

Hermione stopped walking altogether, gaping at him. “It’s not possible...” was all she could say.

“But it is,” he said, visibly annoyed. “You came to me towards the end of December. You’ve been here nearly six months.”

“Oh Gods,” Hermione placed her hand on her tummy. She felt sick. Her breaths were speeding up and getting more difficult to take in and for Merlin’s sake, could she go *one* day without crying? She had never felt weaker. *Six months...*

“Listen to me. *Hermione.*” He was holding her by the shoulders, giving her a small shake now and then to bring her focus back to him but it wasn’t fair, all she ever thought about was him, and she was truly beginning to think she could never get away...

“It doesn’t matter, okay?” he was saying. “Six months is nothing. You’re with me now; I’ll keep you safe from them.”

What the hell is he going on about?

But instead of asking that, she gave him the most venomous look she could summon and blurted out in one breath, “You make me wish I was dead. I hate you.” And then recoiled, waiting for the punishment. When nothing happened, she looked back up at him, who had not moved.

He was angry, that was clear enough. But he appeared to be more angry with himself rather than with her. In fact, he looked as if he regretted answering her question at all.

Hermione felt like shouting at him. *Say something, you brute!*

“We can start over,” his voice was much quieter than normal. “We can go somewhere else and forget everything and start over. They’ll forget about us and I can make you happy.”

The sounds of the nighttime seemed amplified in the midst of their silence. Hermione felt as though she were surrounded by giant crickets.

“Why don’t you understand?” Her voice was equally quiet. “You are the last man in the world who could ever make me happy.”

He grabbed her then, and Hermione winced at the force of his grip but having said all she needed to say, kept quiet.

“I told you I’d try.”

Hermione tried wrenching herself away. “Let me go, Draco.”

His mouth was on hers again and he was pushing her down onto the ground, lifting up her skirt though she tried wrestling his arms away. Cold fingers brushed against her skin, pushing down the straps of her dress.

“Oh no you don’t sweetheart, we had a deal, remember?” She heard the zip of his fly. “Or would you rather take the potion?”

“Not here,” she said. It felt like tearing open a freshly healed wound for him to do this here, so near and so alike as to when he had first raped her.

But he wasn’t listening. His fingers probed inside her, trying to coax her. They had little success. Hermione felt the pain but tried not to respond to it, keeping her attention focused on the stars that watched her from above as Draco’s mouth and hands took from her what they could. The pain grew, she heard him voice his pleasure and she felt him inside her but refused to react.

He was close, she knew, and desperately wished it all to be over with. All she wanted to do was go to sleep and forget for a few precious hours.

“Tell me you love me. Tell me.”

Hermione said nothing. She bit back a cry of pain as he thrust into her more forcefully.

His hand gripped her jaw, forcing her head up to meet his stare. The wildness was back, running rampant in those clear eyes and Hermione’s jaw clamped shut in fear.

“Tell me.”

“I love you.” She whispered the lie but he still heard it, and satisfied, he found his release.

(When Hermione went to sleep later that night, she was kept awake by the frightening look in his eyes as she had lied to him, that he actually believed her.)

Draco had been gone for a long time before Hermione picked herself up off the ground on shaking legs, righting her clothes and brushing the dirt off her skin. Almost immediately after finishing he had been summoned by Voldemort, and he had left quickly, but not before forcing her to repeat what she had said.

She could feel the blood between her thighs as she reentered the Manor stealthily, ignoring the raw pain.

Halfway there she came to a halt. Blaise was coming out of the living room, looking worried, but the expression changed from annoyance to relief to concern at seeing her state of dishevelment.

“He’s not here,” she said dully, and he nodded before glancing at the stains on her skirt.

“Do you need help?”

A flash of anger tore through her. “You didn’t care before. Don’t pretend to care now. Why are you here?”

Blaise looked wounded at her words. “I didn’t mean—”

“*Get me out of here, Zabini,*” she ground out. “Find me my wand and get me *out.*”

“That’s why I’m here,” he said quickly. “The Dark Lord is preparing a big get together with all his followers tomorrow. That includes Draco.”

Her heart soared.

“Be ready tomorrow.”

Another dizzying rush of excitement swept through her and Hermione had to place a hand on the wall to steady herself. Blaise came forward to help but she shook her head.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“If you’re sure,” he gave her another worried glance. “I’ll need an address or directions of some sort to plan out a safe route.”

“You won’t need any, I’m sure you know the way.” Blaise looked at her, confused.

“I want you to take me to Hogwarts.”

A/N:

Bam.

Playlist is up. Link is in profile.

Prepare thy selves for the next installment.

I guess I should have explained better about the ending. There is only one ending, one way it truly ends.

The first is for those who don’t want a really bad ending. There’s nothing really happy about it (sorry for the miscommunication) aside from one key thing, which you’ll find out later. But it is part of the true ending, which will be revealed in the one-shot.

I’ve given you enough warnings. You should know what you want by now. Either keep reading, by all means, or please find something lighter to read. Don’t like how dark this story has been? Don’t go farther.

Thanks for reading, I appreciate feedback.

—C

33. Flight

I own nothing but the plot. Maybe.

“I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you.”

Jane Eyre-Charlotte Bronte

Chapter 34: Flight

For as much as she tried; sleep that night was unachievable.

The library felt like a more adequate place to sleep in; she had barely spent two minutes in the bedroom before she felt she would vomit with fear, expecting Draco to lurch out of the shadows and attack her again. The room was closing in on her; the stained glass window glowed strangely with the light from the other side and she could not bear to even look at the bed.

She was going to be free, and would never sleep on it again if it killed her.

So to the library she went, and trembling with excitement and fear, she huddled on the most comfortable armchair trying to calm herself down enough to get rest. The shadows loomed large and the pop of the fire in the hearth sounded like gunshots, reverberating around the room. Anticipation for morning kept her restless and cold though the fire burned away merrily, almost mocking her uneasiness.

Long ago Hermione might have taken comfort in the calming presence of the books around her but tonight she felt forsaken by them. Once she might have fallen asleep comfortably, imagining she could hear them whispering their stories sweetly to her, but that was in the past and the books were silent now.

It had taken effort and time, but she had managed to persuade Bogg to bring her a pair of jeans. She had expected the poor Elf to confess ‘Master Malfoy’ had not stocked any denim jeans for her, but she was pleasantly surprised when the creature appeared with the bounty in his small hands. She had been of a mind to ask for a top as well, but Bogg was already giving her a queer look. It took Hermione a second to remember it was nearly midnight-he was probably wondering what she wanted them for. Not wanting to arouse his suspicions further, Hermione thanked him profusely and sidled away to revel in her success. She pilfered a pair of Draco’s socks and tugged them on though they were much too large and then pulled the jeans on, nearly crying at how good it felt to wear trousers again. They fit her like a glove; Hermione never thought she’d miss something so much. All she needed was a pair of shoes...

Draco's were out of the question, and she couldn't find any for herself that weren't ridiculous heels-she supposed she would have to ask Blaise to transfigure something into shoes for her, if he could do it.

Now left with only her top half to cover, Hermione had snatched the first jumper she found out of one of Draco's drawers; a large black knitted affair that went past her hands and hips and threatened to slip off one shoulder or the other at any given time. It made her skin crawl to wear it but she forced herself to ignore her own disgust. It covered her and kept her warm, which was all she cared about. Once the deal was done she would burn it.

There was no clock in the library-Draco's doing, of course-so she had no way to tell what the time was. Either Bogg or Draco had shut the drapes on all the windows, so except for the orange glow of the fire, she was awash in total darkness.

Blaise had nearly pitched a fit when she'd told him where she wanted to go.

"Are you off your rocker?" he'd hissed in disbelief. "That's the last place you want to go!"

"Why?" she'd asked, nervously. "What's happening?"

"Nothing, yet," he said, "but there are spies and informants for the Dark Lord all over Hogwarts now, Granger. One screw up and you'll end up back here faster than you can blink."

"Never mind that!" she rolled her eyes. "There's something I need to do."

"What— find Potter?" Blaise said with a hint of derision. "Or Longbottom, before Draco gets to him?"

"He won't get Neville," Hermione said hotly. "He won't."

Blaise had let out a huff of annoyance, and pinched the bridge of his nose. Gods. Was she always this annoying?

"Please understand, Granger. I'm doing this for your safety."

"I don't give a troll's hairy left foot about safety!"

Blaise had to raise a brow at that. That was a first. "Keep in mind, darling; Draco did appoint me the task of looking after you."

She'd given a brittle laugh. "Yes, my self proclaimed husband flatters himself I need protection. I don't particularly care what he thinks. Will you take me to Hogwarts or not?"

There was something so decided in the crease of her brow, the glare in her eyes, that Blaise had no choice but to sigh and nod. He was certain if he'd said no, she would have found a way, with him willing or not, to get to the castle.

There was a quick movement nearby, and Hermione startled awake just in time to choke back a scream when Blaise covered her mouth with his hand.

Her heart had leapt up into her throat, pounding wildly. Hermione cleared it and opened her mouth to chastise him but he cut her off by pressing something into her hand.

It took a moment to register what it was, even as she felt the magic coursing through her, relaxing her limbs and forcing her eyes shut at its strength. She did not need to look twice to confirm it was her wand; the weight, the carved vine pattern on it was all there, and the magic was *hers*. It was a bit of a shock to have it in her hand again-she had long ago accepted the fact Malfoy had destroyed it or would never give it back.

“Thank you,” she said earnestly. *“Where did you get it?”*

Blaise shrugged. “He’d left it with me at Hogwarts because he didn’t want to destroy it. I guess he knew if he left it here he would have broken it a long time ago, so he told me to keep it somewhere safe. Draco’s always been shit at hiding things.” His voice had trailed off and they both knew what he had meant to say next.

Until he got you.

Hermione shrugged it off, and stood, stretching her stiff legs. Upon seeing her feet still bare (save for the socks) she raised her wand, pointing it at two cushions, muttered an incantation.

Please, please let this work...

Seconds later, there before her was a handsome pair of boots.

Hermione smiled, and pulled them on, lacing them tightly. Another quick spell and she had a hair tie in her hand, which she used to pull her hair into a high ponytail, making sure to keep any hair out of her face.

Once she was ready, she pocketed her wand and approached Blaise.

“How will we get there?”

“Portkey,” Blaise said, pulling a bit of cloth out of his pocket, and unfolding it to reveal a train ticket for the Hogwarts Express. ‘After I was let back into Hogwarts, Draco had Snape give me this to get from the school to here. It’ll take us directly into one of those funny little alcoves by the Great Hall.’

Hermione had listened raptly to his words, but was still caught on one thing, and crestfallen, she said, “You mean you don’t know where we are now.”

Blaise shook his head. “Sorry. That’s what I meant earlier. Only he knows where this place is. Never answers when I ask. For all we know we could be on the other side of the Forbidden Forest-if it has one, that is.”

“Why have they given you so much freedom, to come and go as you choose?” she asked him.

“Snape’s headmaster now. He knows I’m the only one to have frequent contact with Draco, and the Dark Lord ordered it anyhow. Look,” he held up his hands, ‘I know you’ve got more questions, but he could be back anytime and it’s for the best we be gone by then. If there’s time we can talk more later, but first things first.’ He held out the ticket, which emitted a pale blue light, still half unwrapped in his palm, and looked at her intently. “Stay close no matter what happens.”

Hermione nodded, and together, they grabbed one end of the ticket.

They landed on their feet, pressed close together by the limited space of the alcove. There was a roaring in her ears that she thought pertained to the rush of the travel by Portkey, and shook it off. Hermione managed to push herself away quickly, and stepped into chaos.

Broken. Everything was broken. Doors were blasted apart, shards of glass littered the floor, bodies lay crumpled every few feet.

There was a faint, acrid stench of smoke in the back of her throat but Hermione saw no fire.

The air itself felt raw-Hermione understood at once the protective enchantments around the school were either failing, if not already fallen.

No, no no.

Blaise had reached her and surveyed the damage with equal parts shock and dread.

“Shit. **Shit.**” His hand gripped Hermione’s upper arm and instantly let her go when her back arched and she hissed loudly in pain. “Sorry. But we’re leaving. Now.”

Hermione wrenched away. “No. You can go if you like, but I have to find something.”

“Don’t be stupid, Hermione!” he snarled, and in the clarity of her anger Hermione realized the roaring in her ears was no after effects of the Portkey. It was screams. Screams and crashes and God knew what else. Her legs turned to jelly and she almost swayed on her feet before righting herself hastily.

It’s happening.

Blaise made a grab for her arm again but she dodged it.

“Thank you for everything,” she said thickly. ‘I’m extremely grateful. Now come with me, or go before *he* finds out what’s happened. *Please,*’ she insisted at seeing his outraged expression. “I don’t want him to kill you.”

There was an explosion on the floor above them, causing rubble and dust to rain down on them, and the ground itself shook underneath them. Blaise conjured a shield to protect himself from the debris, and looked around wildly for the witch, whose safety had been entrusted into his hands.

“GET BACK HERE!”

She had fled. *Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.*

“GRANGER!”

He heard her footsteps then. She was running towards the battle! Blaise swore violently and ran after her, doing his best to avoid bodies of the fallen on the ground. Most of them were Death Eaters, he noticed.

She was up ahead, racing up the stairs and throwing pleading, frightened glances back at him, like a child at a playground aware of its anxious mother. The raw fear in her eyes suggested to him she was thinking of a different chase, in which he knew he had not been part of.

He was right. As she ran, highly aware of the fact that she was being chased, Hermione could not help the sense of terror that overtook her upon hearing Blaise's rapid footfalls behind her. She knew it was Blaise and not Draco behind her, but every time she glanced back it was the enraged, silver-haired wizard who was in pursuit of her. It was all a trick of her mind, she knew that, and forced herself not to give in to the threatening hysterics. She would blink hard and turn back to face front and run faster, because if there was one thing she wanted above anything else it was not to be caught again. Even by Blaise, who meant her no harm. He had saved her, taken her out of her cage, and she would be forever indebted to him for it, but he was sorely mistaken if he thought he could stop her from doing what had to be done.

He nearly caught her at the top, but he managed to get his foot caught on a step, and by the time he was free, she had gone.

Draco arrived at the Manor, tired but somewhat content. The battle had begun. The Dark Lord had gone off to Hogwarts with all his faithful except he, who had been ordered to stay out of the battle in order to prepare.

Draco was a little put out at the idea of not being able to enjoy taking part in the battle. He would have relished some duels-spill some blood perhaps, grab the chance to snuff out a few pestilent lives, but in the end he was more tempted by the happy thought of his wife waiting for him in bed upstairs, so with a light step he made his way there.

He shrugged off his robes once reaching the darkened room, and crept over to the bed, searching for her in the midst of all the sheets.

Only, the bed was perfectly made and not a single soul inhabited it.

Draco was not entirely disturbed by this. Perhaps she was using the loo. But upon further inspection, she was not there, either.

The library, then. He was a little annoyed now, but went to check for his witch. Again, the search proved fruitless, and this time he called for Bogg.

"Where is she?" he asked. "Has she gone outside?"

The poor, miserable creature trembled. "Bogg has not seen Missus Malfoy since she came here, Master."

Draco looked at the Elf sharply. "She spoke to you? What did she say?"

"Missus asked for clothes-jeans, she wanted, and Bogg gives them to her, he did."

"And after?" he barked the question, and the Elf began to wring his worn little hands.

"The Missus comes in here to sleep, Master, and Bogg sees her no more."

Draco didn't need any more explanation. There was a great sense of loss inside him and his ring seemed to pulse angrily on his finger-that was enough for him to know she was not there.

Filled with wrath, Draco slashed out with his wand and the green light flashed brightly in the poor Elf's eyes as he fell to the floor, lifeless.

Draco ran a hand through his hair and stood still, thinking hard. His limbs did not shake. He was not short of breath. No scowl twisted his lips or bent his brow. But the cold fury that had sparked in his eyes fanned into a ruthless flame.

None of the alarms had gone off. No outsider had taken her, then.

That simply made it worse. There was only one person who could have done it, and if this was true then it meant he had been betrayed.

Draco wanted to scream out his anger but his lips stayed shut and no sound escaped him. The room shook; all around the great library books tumbled out of their places and slammed onto the floor, the bookcases themselves tottered in the wake of his fury and the windows shattered, creating a cacophony that would have been too much for the senses.

Draco didn't care. He heard none of it save for the blood roaring through his veins; rushing, bubbling into a frenzy.

His first instinct was to go after her, for he knew there was only one place she could have gone, and indeed, the power of the spells on the ring he'd given her confirmed it. It was like a shouted headline, repeated over and over in his head, where she was. It tugged at him, leading him to her.

If it was Blaise who had betrayed him he could be sure she had gotten her wand back.

I should have destroyed the damned thing the moment I got her.

Turning on his heel, Draco stalked upstairs towards his study.

The little bitch thinks she can leave so easily. Well sweetheart, you've got another think coming. I'll break your wings for this, he vowed.

The door had flown open before he even reached it, and he stormed inside, heading straight for the other door on the far side of the room. This one would not open so easily. He pressed his palm flat against the dark wood and watched as it flashed red before swinging open, granting entry.

The closet was small and stuffy; shelves lined each wall, boasting numerous odd artifacts he didn't care to have others see, or simply items that needed safekeeping. Draco found what he was after, and tucked it away in his pocket with great care before leaving both rooms.

He made sure he had his wand before he left. Merlin knew he didn't need it-the brunt of the magic he did now was done wandlessly, but it always helped to have his wand nearby. The pounding of his heart grounded him, even as the tracking charm pulled at him more and more vigorously, stoking the urge to recapture her. Still, he'd gotten his wish-he yearned for blood, for claiming what was his, for destruction, and he would have it now. Once he brought her back he might thank her, if things went well.

The Dark Lord was going to be furious, but he wouldn't be around much longer to know what had happened, of that Draco was sure. The only drawback was that with him going to retrieve his traitorous wife he was taking time away from preparing for what really mattered.

But she mattered too. Oh Salazar, she mattered.

Fly as fast as you can, sweet little bird, he thought, pulling on his hood, *but remember that dragons fly faster*.

Swiftly, he turned on the spot and disappeared into the darkness.

A/N:

(I've been waiting to use the rest of that Jane Eyre quote since Chapter 27.)

34. What Happened At The Battle

I own nothing and nothing owns me.

Chapter Thirty-Five: What Happened at the Battle

“The saints can’t help me now,
The ropes have been unbound
I hunt for you with bloody feet across the hallowed ground.”
Howl-Florence and the Machine

The Room of Requirement was in uproar. The occupants themselves rushed around like a swarm of agitated hornets, helping each other up and drawing out their wands before streaming out the door after dosing out final shouts of encouragement towards Harry, Ron and Neville, who stood together beside the portrait that led into the Hog’s Head.

Each time the door to the strange room was opened the sounds of the calamity outside poured in and they were reminded once more the gravity of the current situation.

Hogwarts was under attack. Voldemort had come.

“What are we going to do?” Neville asked urgently once they were the last three in the room.

“There’s something we have to find,” Harry said. ‘We don’t know what it is yet but it has to be in here.’

“Why, is it important?” Neville asked.

“It’s the only way to get rid of Voldemort for good,” Ron said. “Whatever this is, it’s what’s keeping from dying.”

“And he left it in here?” Neville asked, looking around with a dubious expression.

“There’s more of them,” Harry explained. “He scattered them around in different places. We’ve been tracking them down and destroying them.”

“That’s why you broke into Gringotts.”

“Yeah.”

“But you don’t know what to look for?”

Harry and Ron looked sheepish. “We heard there was one inside the school in this room, but never found out exactly what it was. It’s likely to be a relic from one of the school

founders, like some of the other Horcruxes. The snake is another one, the last one, we think. We came as soon as possible, but we didn't know any of this would happen today."

Neville nodded. "Right. Right."

Ron was on the verge of asking how exactly they would find the Horcrux in a room full of hammocks and discarded sleeping bags when he looked around and jumped.

Sometime while they had been talking, the room had changed. The room was even bigger than before, if such a thing was possible (and with magic it always was). The room reminded him of home, it was small mountains consisting of odds and ends: books, broken furniture, and locked trunks, and old sets of robes from decades ago. Boxes upon piles of boxes towered above them, mirrors stood tall and cracked every few feet and dead plants and owl cages cluttered the corners.

Harry and Neville had noticed it too, and looked around in awe and slight disbelief.

How would they ever find the Horcrux in all this mess?

Nearly shaking with urgency, they began their search.

What felt like ages later, Ron sighed and wiped his hands on his jeans.

"We're wasting time here, Harry."

Harry didn't seem to have heard him. He quickened his pace and dug through the pile of forgotten objects with greater fervor than before.

Neville stood. "He's right. The battle is still going on and we need to end it as soon as possible."

Harry ignored them, still searching. He couldn't leave now. He had to find it, he had to. But Neville had a point. Swearing softly to himself, he straightened and nodded.

"Once it's over we come back here. I am not leaving this school until we find that Horcrux."

They left the room swiftly, almost running to the main source of the noise. Ron yelled as an Acromantula scuttled past them into the adjourning hall, and would have sent a curse after it had Neville not stopped him.

"That would just get its attention and then it would come after us," he said, and Ron lowered his wand, pale as snow.

When they had arrived the halls had been full of battling witches and wizards but they were silent and empty now. Still, the screams and explosions and all sorts of calamity they heard now were coming from the courtyard, which was not far off. There were bodies crumpled about, Harry was almost afraid to look at them but did so anyway, and was relieved to find most of them wearing the damning mask of the Death Eater. But now and then they passed a schoolmate-Colin Creevey, Hannah Abbott, Parvati Patil. They were all dead. Harry had checked their pulse, vainly allowing himself to believe they merely had been Stunned, but there was nothing he could do.

He wondered if he ever saw Hermione again, if she would be a lifeless corpse or as alive as she had been on the last night he had seen her.

“We need a plan,” Ron said. ‘We can’t just go in there and expect everything to run smoothly.’

“There’s no time to plan,” Harry said. “We fight our way through. We kill the snake, and then I battle Voldemort.”

“How are we supposed to kill the snake?” Neville asked.

Harry grabbed the strap of Hermione’s purse and lifted it off his body, and gave it to Ron.

“The Sword of Gryffindor.”

Neville’s eyes went wide. “You have it? In there? How?”

Ron shook his head. “Long story. No time.” He cast a quizzical look at Harry. “You’re going to go to him alone, aren’t you?”

“Yes, and there’s a reason why—”

“I’m going with you, mate.”

Neville scowled at Ron. “**We’re** going with you, Harry.”

Harry’s eyes brimmed with tears and caught the two other Gryffindors in a tight embrace, acting out the goodbyes he could not say out loud. Suddenly he missed Hermione more than ever. He cleared his throat and pulled away.

“Go after the snake. I have to go alone.”

“Fine,” Ron said. “But you’re taking the Cloak. You’ll be captured if any of them see you.” He reached into the bag, fished around, pulled it out and deposited it in Harry’s arms. The fabric snagged a little around the pouch he wore around his neck, but Harry tugged it free. The slight weight of the Snitch rested above his heart.

“Go after the snake,” he repeated, and disappeared under the Invisibility Cloak.

Blaise was still following her. Hermione let him. If he truly wanted to stop her he would have by now, but two minutes into their chase he had ceased to shout after her, especially when the Death Eaters came. Five of them had come marching around a corner she had just been about to turn, and took one look at her before raising their wands. Blaise’s shout of warning reached her and she darted to the side in time to avoid at least three curses aimed at her. She could hear Blaise running again, coming closer and closer and the irrational thought that he had planned this ambush invaded her mind.

But that didn’t make sense. Why would he free her and then let her be captured again? Hermione Stunned three of them and blasted the one closest to her down the length of the hallway with such force she could hear the crunch their skull made when he or she collided with the stone wall. Blaise reached her by then just as she dodged another body-binding hex from the last Death Eater, and before Hermione could retaliate he hissed the killing curse and the sole remaining Death Eater dropped to the ground.

Blaise held out his hand to help her up and she took it gratefully, shaken.

They climbed up more sets of stairs and wound through even more hallways as fast as they could until they found the Room of Requirement at last. Hermione paced frenetically outside the door, thinking, *I need the room of lost and forgotten things.*

When the door appeared they scrambled through and shut it behind them with a bang.

Blaise opened his mouth to say something but before a single syllable could be uttered Hermione darted to the incredible pile of objects.

“Accio Horcrux!”

Nothing happened. There was no time to lose, then. Shoving her wand into her pocket, Hermione began to push things around, throwing everything back over her shoulders as fast as she could, heart racing.

No time No time No time No time to lose No time No time No time to lose No time No time no time

“What are you doing, Granger?” Blaise’s voice was soft, disbelieving.

“That tiara Draco talked about, the diadem,” she panted, throwing a handful of books behind her. ‘I need you to help me look for it, Blaise. If we find it we can stop Vol-him.’ “You’re losing your mind,” he said. “How are we going to stop him with *that*? What would we do-*wear* it?”

“Destroy it,” she said, grunting as she pushed aside a heavy trunk.

“Ok..How?”

“One thing at a time!” was her curt reply. When he didn’t answer she turned around and looked at him beseechingly. “Please, Blaise.”

“Even if I do help, how do you expect to find it in all this rubbish?”

“I’ll find it,” she said, throwing a number of tattered school bags to the side after looking through them.

“This is mad,” he said, and she turned around again.

“Oh, enough,” she said angrily. “You *want* this to end don’t you; else you would never have helped me or followed me all the way here. You could have left any time. You’re doing all this behind Draco’s back for a reason, Blaise.”

Turning back to her work, she moved to another area of the room. Blaise could hear her rummaging through the mess, picking things up and tossing them away with great speed.

You could leave right now, a voice in his mind hissed. Just leave her. She’s digging herself into this mess and if she gets caught or killed then it’s all on her, not you.

But Blaise couldn’t, because she was right.

He moved to the other end of the room, rolling up his sleeves. Reaching a pile of his own, he reached out and began to search.

Hermione climbed on top of several trunks to reach the oddly shaped package. A cloak of the ugliest shade of green she had seen in her life covered it, along with a moth-eaten witch's hat of faded scarlet. Grasping part of the cloak, Hermione pulled it back and threw it to the side, unearthing a marble bust of a beautiful woman. Cracked, dusty and chipped, the bust had definitely seen better days, and the visage of the woman was possibly the fairest Hermione had ever seen, but the diadem was the only thing she had eyes for, and there it sat proudly on the head of the marble woman.

No time to lose No time No time No time

With shaking hands she reached up and snatched it, then climbed back down the trunks to Blaise, who was knee deep in a sea of books and mouldy cushions.

"What, have you given up?" he asked, but trailed off upon seeing what she held triumphantly.

"I found it!"

Hermione could have danced. This was the happiest she had felt in months, excluding the times she had been under the influence of the Love Potion.

"How do we destroy it?" Blaise asked. Hermione closed her eyes and summoned forth in her mind all she had discovered about Horcruxes with Harry and Ron after the death of Dumbledore.

"Basilisk venom," she said softly. "Fiendfyre." Was there more? She couldn't remember.

Her happiness ebbed away. How *would* they destroy it?

Blaise drew out his wand. "I don't suppose you've got a bottle of basilisk venom anywhere on you?"

"Of course not. It's incredibly rare," Hermione snapped, and watched as he took the diadem from her hands and placed it on the floor.

"Step back."

"What are you doing?"

"Listen to me, Granger. Step back. Way back."

Hermione walked backwards, hit with the realization of what he was about to do.

"Don't," she said hurriedly. "It's too dangerous!"

"One of the very few upsides to being best friends-well, formerly being best friends anyway-with someone who's family is in the Dark Lord's inner circle and related to an insane aunt is that he passes things along quite often," he said, "I've learned quite a bit from Draco."

Looking at Hermione square in the eyes, he said, "Be prepared to run should things go wrong."

"Voco victus incendia."

The fire poured out of his wand; churning, roaring, more intense than any fire she'd ever seen and the figures in it charged forward with shining yellow eyes, devouring the diadem before their eyes. A strangled scream came from it as Hermione watched tensely. A puddle of a strange black substance bled from the diadem. There was a split second in which she was certain the cursed fire was going to go out of control, there was a second of silence and then, just before it could explode, it was gone.

Hermione sighed, feeling the tension drain from her body. Blaise approached her, smiling, wiping perspiration from his forehead.

"I think that was a success, no?"

Hermione nodded. "That was excellent," she said.

"You think?" he asked, and she nodded again before walking forward to inspect what remained. The diadem was beyond recognition, charred and twisted into a black lump. The sapphires were no longer visible-she supposed they had melted.

"Alright. We're done here. Let's go," Blaise said, catching her arm in his grip.

"I have to find Harry and Ron," she protested.

"Are you even sure they're here?" was his annoyed reply. "Last I heard they dropped off the face of the Earth, Granger. You could be risking your life for nothing."

"I *know* they're here." It was true, she could feel it. They had to be.

Almost at his wit's end, Blaise took her by the shoulders.

"He probably already knows you're gone, Hermione. For all we know he could be here now, searching the castle for you, and believe me when I say he will find you."

Hermione believed him. She had no doubt Draco would find her but she was a free woman now, as she always had been, and was determined to fight to her last breath. There was no time to be afraid, she had spent a year and six months being afraid.

"Look at me, Granger." She looked. "Come with me and I'll take you somewhere he can't find you. *Forget about your friends for once and think about yourself.*"

She wanted to. Oh, how she wanted to. But she knew she could not abandon her friends when there was so much at stake.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But this is what I have to do."

Blaise looked angry for a moment, but said nothing. Awkwardly, Hermione clasped his hands in hers.

"I can't thank you enough for what you've done. If we're both still alive by the end of this I would be happy to clear your name."

"Damn it, Granger," he said. "You don't always have to sacrifice yourself. Save yourself, just this once."

Pulling out of his grip, she clutched her wand and walked towards the exit. Once she reached the door she turned around.

“Be careful, Blaise,” she said. “Don’t let Draco find you.”

“Likewise,” he said, watching as she left the room.

Seconds passed. Blaise didn’t know what to do. Sure, the best option for him was to go. Far away and duck under a new identity for a while, perhaps. Maybe move to America and stick it out in the Muggle World until the war was long, long over and Draco’s wrath had cooled over.

But what would that make him?

Smart, a voice in his mind said.

A coward, said another.

I am neither, he thought, striding towards the door. He had made up his mind.

Someone needed to look out for Granger. Walking out on her own like that, she was practically painting a bull’s-eye on herself. Draco would find her in no time if the Dark Lord didn’t find her first, and then all his work would have been for nothing. He would have betrayed his best friend for nothing.

Had he done the right thing, freeing her? One part of him said yes-no one deserved to live the way she had for six months. Another part said no. In helping her he had attached his own target onto his back. Draco was his best friend, but more importantly, a great ally. Draco had become one of the most dangerous wizards around-not as great as the Dark Lord, perhaps, but getting there. And now Draco would be out for his blood. Maybe he’d made a mistake, but there was no going back now.

Putting distance between himself and the Room of Requirement, Blaise hurried down sets of stairs, following the noise that echoed up from below. She couldn’t have gone too far; it had been less than two minutes at least since she had left the room, he would catch up with her quickly.

Quickly was not enough, though. He might be fast but Draco was faster, and ruthless.

Just as he reached the landing there was a loud crash somewhere in the space behind him, but Blaise took no notice of it and kept running towards the courtyard. But the sounds were catching up to him now, whatever they were, and Blaise turned around, to find nothing.

Relieved, he turned back only to meet with a wand tip pressing against his nose and a silver Death Eater’s mask, and then his world went dark.

The Snitch was warm in his hand as he entered the forest. Harry took a deep breath, and raised it to his lips.

Cries rang out around her, of pain, of fear or anger as she ducked and dodged and pushed her way through the melee. Casting spells whenever she could, Hermione made sure she played her part in the battle, stunning Death Eaters left and right, protecting her friends and

classmates. She caught a brief glimpse of Luna as she darted past; Luna, her lovely face fierce with concentration and smeared with blood as she shot a disarming spell at two Death Eaters rounding on her. Hermione made sure to Stun at least one of them as she ran by.

Professor Flitwick was holding steady ground with ease, sending viciously sharp quills into the eyes of any attackers nearby. Someone elbowed her in the ribs by accident as they passed her, and she turned to see Professor Trelawny holding her wand above her head in a graceful arc, directing enchanted crystal balls to fly towards a group of Death Eaters battling students and explode in their faces. The sound of exploding glass and howls and shrieks of pain filled Hermione's ears as she went on. A flash of red hair caught her eye and Hermione wheeled around, expecting to see Ron, but instead found Fred and George dueling with three large Death Eaters, who seemed to be winning.

Shooting out one spell after another, Hermione stuck around long enough to be sure her spells had hit the intended targets and succeeded before moving on. The confused twins looked around for their helper, but finding none, bound their attackers by hand and foot, and continued on.

An arm knocked into her jaw and Hermione yelled out in pain as the accidental blow pushed her backwards. There was blood in her mouth, her teeth ached, and her lip throbbed red hot with pain but no serious damage had occurred and the perpetrator had fallen onto his front, his silver mask clattering onto the floor. Hermione looked up, wiping the blood from her jaw as she ran away and locked eyes with none other than her Head of House, Professor McGonagall. That the older woman was shocked was apparent-the Professor's aged eyes were wide with surprise and her mouth had gone slack. Hermione had no time to smile or say anything because she had gone too far away, and the figures of others in the room obscured her view.

A familiar set of doors, blasted apart so they hanged on their hinges came into sight and Hermione ran through them.

She had reached the edges of the courtyard, having chosen to stay hidden among the large piles of rubble lest anyone should see her. She was invisible right now; she did not want to be seen for many reasons.

The courtyard was eerily silent, considering how many people there were. Hermione looked around eagerly. Was it over? Where was Harry?

Despair. That was all she could see; it was heavy in the air. Tear streaked faces and stunned, defeated expressions made up the mass that had congregated outside. Her knees went weak.

No. Please, no.

And then the cry rang out: "Harry Potter is dead!"

The cold ground caught her. There was no air in her lungs, her body was not cooperating with her, and it would not allow her to draw more air in. A wail crept up her throat, but with no air to sustain it or set it free, it crumbled away inside her. The ache in her chest felt like it would swallow her whole, and for the moment she wished it would, for she had been too late.

Hermione wasn't sure how long she stayed that way. After a certain point her lungs kicked back in and she breathed in so much air she felt dizzy. The courtyard was silent now and

carefully, numbly, Hermione picked herself up off the ground and looked out from behind the rubble.

Everyone had gone. Only Death Eaters remained.

A hissing sound nearby startled her and curious, Hermione turned only to come face to face with an enormous white snake. Hermione bit back her scream, not wanting to draw attention to herself as she began to back away slowly. The great reptile followed her, its odious tongue flicking out at her.

“Stupefy!” she whispered, pointing her wand at it. To her dismay, the spell had no effect. *Voldemort must be extremely fond of his pet to protect it so*, she thought. Another try yielded the same result.

The snake continued to advance. Hermione turned and ran.

She didn’t get far-the snake was faster than she would have allowed herself to believe, and somehow found herself trapped in a little hollow made of rubble with a slab of stone jutting over the top, covering her with shadows.

How had she gotten down there? Her mind was still foggy, but it didn’t matter now, did it, because she was going to be eaten alive by Voldemort’s pet.

“Confringo!” she hissed. The snake twitched a little, but nothing else happened and it came closer, entering the little hollow and lifting its head up, opening its mouth wide as it prepared to strike.

Not like this!

She raised her wand again for one last try as it came closer, pressing herself into the dark, cold stone when a shout rang out as the quiver of something heavy and shiny whistled through the air from directly above where she stood underneath the slab of stone. A swift, clean slicing sound came next and then a heavy thud as Nagini’s severed head dropped to the floor to join the rest of its body.

Hermione’s heart beat frantically in her chest and she stayed still, not sure what had just happened. There was someone above her who had saved her. Did they know there was someone down here, and more importantly, how had they done it? It was clearly the word of a sword, but where could they have got a sword from?

Footsteps sounded above her and Hermione tensed, unsure of what to do. Whoever had just saved her was coming down to where she was. Did she want that? She didn’t know, she didn’t want anyone to see her but Harry or Ron or Neville.

Collective cries of shock and surprise filled the air then, and suddenly whoever had saved her took off running towards the noise. Hermione waited a few seconds to come outside, stepping around Nagini’s body as she did so. More shouts. She chanced a look at the courtyard, which had filled again. Something was happening-someone was shouting something but she couldn’t hear clearly so she stepped closer, making sure she could not be seen from where she stood. Dark eyes searched through the large crowd for any sign of Ron. She had to find Ron, he would tell her what had happened to Harry and

There’s someone behind me.

Before Hermione could turn around one arm wrapped around her waist, a hand was pressed firmly against her mouth and even as she bit down hard on the hand and pushed herself away, it was too late. She had already been Apparated away.

A/N:

Leave a review?

Oh yes, please do!

PS: Voco Victus Incendia translates to summon living fire in Latin. I made it up. I know it sucks. Sadly I am not JK Rowling, nor do I possess her talent for coming up with wicked sounding incantations.

35. Reunion

I own nothing, woe.

Warning: Pretty extreme violence.

Chapter Thirty-Six: Reunion

The Shrieking Shack was just as it had been the last time she had been inside. Hermione shivered. The same person she had been with last time was with her now, and the memories flooded her for a moment as she recalled exactly what had happened here so many months ago.

It was child's play compared to what would happen now.

It didn't make sense that he had brought her here. Why here, of all places? Hermione had expected to be taken back to the Manor, but she wasn't complaining. Not in the least. Once he took her back there would be no hope of ever leaving again; she had not forgotten about the wards that kept her from leaving his property. The second she stepped foot inside that place she would be as good as dead, but at least here she had a chance to fight back and she was prepared to take full advantage of that.

The heavy drumming of her heart pounded in her ears as he turned his back to her to place her wand (which he had torn from her grip when he had captured her) onto an old, worn table before turning back to face her.

The wildness, the unrestrained ferocity were permanent fixtures in his eyes now, he looked at her with no expression on his face and she had to struggle to not break eye contact though every part of her wished to.

There was no time to be afraid. This was what it came down to.

Slowly, he moved towards her and moving on instinct she shrank back but he kept coming, never taking his eyes from hers, moving until he had her trapped against him and the wall.

It took effort to breathe evenly when her heart and lungs were galloping ahead like horses. Hermione looked up at him passively, trying to convey a message with her eyes.

I am not afraid.

But that was hard to believe when she was shaking so, and when he could see right through the lie.

Liar, his eyes said. They almost glowed with the revelation.

The way she was tensed, the way those alert brown eyes watched him, he could tell she was waiting for him to attack. Perhaps he would have obliged her once, to set her at ease. But he owed her nothing now, of that she had made sure. No, he would take his time now, and watch her break down.

He stayed silent and still and Hermione grew nervous. Those cold eyes never left her and rarely blinked, trapping her under his gaze. Once Hermione tried to speak, for the silence had become unbearable, but the second she opened her mouth he raised his hand and covered her mouth with the tips of his fingers. The touch was gentle, not what she had expected, and she tore her eyes away from his at last, turning her head to rid herself of his touch.

"You thought you could run away from me." His voice was softer than she had ever heard it, she nearly missed his words entirely as she turned back to face him again.

"And you thought you could keep me against my will," she replied. "You were wrong."

Again, his hand wound its way up between them to grip her jaw tightly. Hermione sucked in a breath-her eyes were glued to his-she couldn't look away no matter how hard she tried. He came closer, and she jerked on instinct but all he did was frown.

"I see now I was too lenient with you," he said, and flexing his arm, he pushed her roughly to the floor. Hermione landed with a cry of pain; the skin on below her elbow had been scraped away to reveal an angry red wound that began to bleed. Behind her came the sound of his footsteps and frantically, Hermione tried to raise herself back up only to come back down hard when he pushed her down with his foot.

"Disobedient, ungrateful little bitch," he kicked her side. Hermione felt something *crack* inside her and cried out as he did it again. Again, he pushed her down and delivered another kick directly to her stomach, and unable to scream, Hermione curled into herself, shielding her front with her arms. The next one lifted her off the floor. She landed hard, and her whole body flared in protest but she still struggled to distance herself from him.

"You took Blaise from me," he said. "For that you'll suffer."

Hermione could only wheeze, her lungs were on fire. When she finally managed to sit up he swooped in close and snatched at her wrists, settling over her, and Hermione panicked. Letting out a wild, hysteric sound she bucked underneath him, and when he lost his balance she struck out at him with her legs, pushing him several paces backwards. His shout of anger made her double her efforts to get up and leave the room. She had just managed to get up on her knees when he moved in again, and knowing what was coming next, she tried to move away but his *Crucio* caught her all the same.

He watched as the pain consumed her, taking over her body and squeezing the tears from her eyes, the agonized screams from her throat. Her screams filled the room, roaring in his ears. The unnatural jerking and writhing of her body did not faze him; he had reminded himself he was doing this to teach her a lesson. She had to *learn*. A high keening escaped her, her body arched up and she slammed back down onto the floor, rolling onto her side to curl up in a ball as he ended the spell.

Her palms were bleeding-she had dug her nails into her flesh so hard as to cut through her skin. She could not control the shaking of her body. Draco had crouched down before her, grabbed a fistful of her hair close to her scalp and yanked her head up closer to his, wrenching

a cry of pain from the pained witch. Briefly, her hands came up to his chest, and clenched on the fabric of his robes in a pleading manner but she didn't dare try to restrain him again for fear of another round with the torture curse.

"When I'm through with you, you'll be wishing you had never left me," he breathed. Hermione's eyes widened and she let out a strangled sob. 'Don't worry, darling little bird,' he pressed a lingering kiss to her mouth; she shook harder than ever beneath him. "I'll be thorough."

"Please-forgive me," she whispered haltingly, unable to stop herself. 'Please, Draco, please.' The words were just slipping out, she had no control over herself. "I'm sorry!"

He struck her and she cried out, falling silent as she held her bleeding palm to her cheek. Silently, he watched as she tried to stand again and he let her.

Once she was fully upright Draco stood too and grabbed her by the arm, dragging her to a corner of the miserable room. Her whole body shook, and her arm flared with pain, but she made no sound.

"Time to go home," he said, and Hermione's insides turned to ice. He must have thought she'd looked hopeful, because he said, "You misunderstand me, sweetheart. Your punishment will only continue once we get there. It's time for you to learn your lesson once and for all."

His eyes drifted down and he moved to straighten the shoulder of her jumper, which had slipped down to reveal her bare shoulder. With a gentle hand he pulled it back up but his skin brushed against hers longer than it should have and the bile crawled up her throat. As he moved she caught a fleeting glimpse of her wand, which lay on the table just behind him and wholly within her reach.

This was her chance-but how could she get it without him noticing?

Bracing herself, Hermione reached up and placed her palm on his chest over his heart. He looked down sharply with mild surprise, his clear, frightening eyes locking onto hers suddenly, a raw need burning within their depths. The second their eyes met a horrible thrill ran through her, raising the hairs along her flesh. Hermione reached behind him slowly.

"Say it."

Hermione knew what he wanted her to say but she would not. She refused to feed him the lie he so craved, to say that her heart belonged to him. She would rather die than be forced to let those words past her lips again. She grasped her wand with trembling fingers, and struggled not to fumble it or make any noise.

"Say it."

His grip on her shoulder turned bruising. Hermione opened her mouth.

"Avada Kedavra."

A violent flash of green light tore through the room, illuminating his eyes eerily, perfectly capturing the shock and rage expressed on his face as he realized only a fraction too late what had happened. He fell to the floor heavily and Hermione stepped back, still clutching her wand.

Hermione stared at Draco Malfoy's lifeless body in shock, unsure of whether to laugh or cry.

I killed him.

She hadn't meant to. She hadn't, she really, truly hadn't.

The Stupefy had been ready on her lips but when she opened her mouth the Killing Curse came instead, pushing past the Defensive spell before she realized what was happening.

What would she do now? It hurt to breathe, black spots danced across her vision. What had she done? *What had she done?* Shouldn't this have made her feel better? She had gotten her wish; here was her attacker dead at last, by her own hand but she didn't know what she felt now except for the agonizing pain. Draco's accusing eyes stared up at her from where he lay on the ground.

Hermione stepped forward, and nearly jumped out of her skin at a loud bang from nearby outside the Shrieking Shack. There was a curious sound-a wounded animal? Someone was running towards the Shrieking Shack, coming closer and closer. Someone yelled something.

She couldn't help it-she panicked. The urge to flee was overwhelming, and finally, Hermione gave in. She turned on her heel, ignoring the pain that simple movement caused, and vanished.

Arthur Weasley made his way past the gate and through the garden slowly, rubbing his sore back. A horrible, hectic day it had been. The Battle had taken hours, but had flown by faster than a Snitch and by the end of it he had lost one son and many friends. The recuperation efforts had begun immediately after, starting with the cleanup and restoration of the castle and tending to the injured. The boys had gone about searching the castle for something and someone they wouldn't name, but had found neither one, and eventually returned to the castle, silent and forlorn. The twins had accompanied Ginny and Charlie in the cleanup of the castle while Bill and Molly and he assisted in the healing. Then he had had to go to the Ministry to clear a few things up and grab his coat before finally heading home to the Burrow.

Grief for his son Percy weighed down his feet and slowed his movements, blurring his eyes with hot tears. His good, valiant son, who had returned to fight with them into the battle, only to be slain by the enemy. He regretted that he had not been there to hold his son, that he, not Fred and George, had been the one to see the killer's blood spilled on the floor. But it didn't really matter now. Percy was dead and so was the elder Goyle, and he had nothing to do but grieve.

The cool summer night brought radiance into Molly's tidy little garden; he could hear the crickets and the other wee insects happily chirping away into the mist that settled above the ground. The lights were on in the Burrow-it was very late, and yet no one had gone to sleep, apparently.

He would be the first, then. Sleep was what he needed. Sleep, and silence. But those were the two things he knew for certain he would not get that night. Arrangements for a funeral had to be made. Molly needed comforting. The twins had locked themselves into their room

right after they had come home, he knew they needed assurance that their brother's death had not been caused by them for distracting him. Harry and Ron needed time to be alone-Harry especially. What that poor boy had gone through-Arthur shook his head sadly. He could not spend all night out here thinking. There were things to be done.

Upon reaching the back door, however, Arthur stopped short. There was someone there, lying on their side and curled up in the fetal position. Horror-struck, Arthur stepped forward, grabbing his wand. Ginny? What had happened to her?

But it wasn't Ginny, he realized as he came closer. This person had long, decidedly not ginger hair. A tattered jumper revealed heavily bruised skin and bloody wounds.

Astonishment was not sufficient enough to describe how Arthur felt. The person was pale as death, and shaking badly. It was difficult to tell if she was even breathing. Whoever this was, she needed help *now*.

Without another thought Arthur picked her up into his arms, preparing to enter the house. A whimper of pain came from the girl and he opened his mouth to apologize when she lifted her head and her eyes opened, and his apology died in his throat, for he had at last recognized Hermione Granger.

"Hello, Mr. Weasley," she said. Her voice was hoarse and hardly above a whisper and her eyes were more than a little distant. "I'm sorry I couldn't make it last Christmas." And then she fainted.

A/N:

One step closer to the end.

I know some of you guys may be upset because of Draco's death and I do apologize, but please don't stop reading just because of that. There are many more twists and turns coming up, I assure you.

Reviews are always welcome.

—Charlotte

36. Haunting and Healing

Nothing pertaining to the wondrous world of Harry Potter belongs to me, despite countless prayers.

Hold on to your hats, duckies, we've got a long one here!

Stay tuned for the Author's Note, please.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Haunting and Healing

*"Don't want to live in fear and loathing,
I want to feel like I am floating,
Instead of constantly exploding
in fear and loathing..."*

Fear and Loathing-Marina and the Diamonds

Hermione sat up slowly with squinted eyes, almost afraid to open them, afraid of what she might see. There was warmth all around her. Warmth, not cold, and she shivered as she felt it seep into her body. The sunlight was so strong in the room the moment she fully opened her eyes for a fleeting second she panicked, thinking she had gone blind, but at last her vision cleared and she remembered where she was, how she had gotten there.

The room was small and quaint, rosy-colored and soft-looking in every aspect. It was such a stark contrast to the elegant rooms she had been so used to seeing whilst in captivity, it took a moment to let it all sink in. There was movement at the end of the bed she was in and snapping back to herself, she turned quickly to see who her company was.

"It's alright, dear," came Mrs. Weasley's kind, soothing voice. Warm, worn hands took Hermione's and held them gently. "It's alright. You're fine now; no one's going to hurt you anymore."

Relief in its purest form, great and overwhelming, was what Hermione felt then and not quite knowing what she was doing, smiled, nodding for a second before it wavered and she collapsed into tears. Tears of joy, of rage and sadness leaked from her eyes and she held her hands to her mouth to hide her incredulous and horrified smile.

Mrs. Weasley hurried to her side immediately and held Hermione to her chest in a motherly fashion, trying to hide her own upset.

"Th-th-thank you," Hermione sobbed. "I'm sorry, so sorry..."

“There’s nothing to be sorry for,” Mrs. Weasley scolded gently. “Whatever happened to you was not your fault. But you need more rest, dear. There will be time to talk when you wake.”

Hermione nodded again, and accepted the vial handed to her, sipping at it carefully before downing the rest. At once the power of the Dreamless Sleep Potion took hold of her and Hermione fell asleep.

Mrs. Weasley leaned over the bed to right the quilt that had fallen down into Hermione’s lap when she had woken, and pulled it up gently to cover the sleeping girl. Something gave her pause before she did so; she stared at the young witch before her and wondered exactly what she had gone through to warrant such hysterics upon being told no harm would come to her.

Where had she been all this time? With whom had she been? Molly recalled Minerva’s letter from months ago, and came to the conclusion that she had not been told the whole story. She looked at Hermione again, reached out to wipe the tears from her cheeks, and smoothed her hair away from her neck and shoulders when something caught her attention.

A silvery scar, bordered by pink on Hermione’s shoulder glowed in the sunlight. Molly would have dismissed it as nothing but her senses were still sharp after forty years so she looked at it more closely, and paled when she realized it was a bite mark.

Concern rose inside her—who had bitten her? Was it a werewolf bite? When had this happened? No, it couldn’t be a werewolf bite—the spacing of the teeth marks, the shape itself proved it was made by a human, though whom could be so terrible as to leave that mark on another was beyond her. There was another scar, too. On the inside of her arm, an ornate M could be faintly seen. It was too fine and well-done to have been done with a knife. She wasn’t sure what to make of it. Molly’s gaze landed on Hermione’s face—troubled even in sleep. Horrible ideas were creeping into her mind, ones that she wished never to associate with anyone she cared for, but she could not deny them.

She had not medically inspected Hermione once Arthur had brought her in—everyone had been shocked at the sudden arrival, and they all guiltily wondered how long she had been waiting outside their door, too weak to even call for help. All obviously visible wounds had been treated—the cuts and severe scrape on her elbow, the cut lip and bruised cheek, but nothing else. News had been sent to the Order, to Minerva and they all debated on whether or not her appearance should be told to the Daily Prophet. They had decided to keep it quiet, at least until the Ministry and the Prophet were back in order. Someone had been sent to find Hermione’s parents. The twins and Ginny literally had had to fight off Harry and Ron, who were hell-bent in seeing their best friend. Charlie, being the strongest of them all, had been stationed at the door to make sure she was not disturbed until she was ready to see anyone besides Molly.

But now, she supposed it was time. Molly hesitated, wondering if she should wait to get permission from her charge, but decided she had much better do it now. The girl could have internal injuries and be dying from them for all she knew! Molly cast one last, troubled look at the sleeping witch and braced herself. A sense of foreboding had come over her suddenly, and she knew whatever she would find would not be good.

Molly put down her wand with a shaking hand, suppressing her tears, and with extra care she tucked the quilt around Hermione. That horrid scar on her shoulder peeked at her from under a thick strand of Hermione's long hair. Molly had tried several spells to make it fade away but none worked. It was as if the giver of the mark had wanted it to scar that way so everyone could see it. Again, Molly wondered who would do such a thing. Regular, loving bites were not unheard of, of course. But this was the opposite. This was a savage bite in the way it had been administered, not loving in the least. There was a very slim possibility that it might have loving, or that it was something Hermione liked, but what else Molly had found on Hermione's body had said otherwise.

She had found and tended to two cracked ribs on Hermione's left side, and had worried about a punctured lung, but further spells showed no such damage. Bruises that she had not found before were found, worse than the ones on her face and arms. These were instantly healed, and faded to green and yellow, still unsightly but much better than the original black and purple. The predominant bruises took up all of Hermione's right side, spreading from below her breast to her hip, marring her body like splashes of ink on a pure canvas. Her bleeding lip had been mended easily, but that, coupled with the signs of hair pulling and the strain on her throat gave Molly leave to suspect a Cruciatus had been used on the girl, which made her heart constrict.

Molly had forced herself to check lower down, remembering that there were other forms of torture in which magic was not needed. She brought to mind her lessons in Healing, from before she had met Arthur, and found what she had desperately wished would not be there. Signs of trauma and forced entry were evident. Tears in the flesh that had been healed, but the scars still showed. Molly worked as carefully and gently as possible though she knew the girl would not wake, she consciously made effort to not discomfit her any more than she already had been. Even though asleep, Hermione's body seized up and jerked away slightly, she frowned more deeply in her sleep, and that was all Mrs. Weasley needed.

As she pulled off her gloves Mrs. Weasley fought to contain her tears. Who had done this, and why? She was only a child, barely entering adulthood! Hermione should have been in her care when she had gone missing-how would she explain this to Mr. and Mrs. Granger? This was a nightmare come to life for Mrs. Weasley, who over the years had come to see Hermione as a daughter just as much as Harry felt like a son to her. Whoever it was, Molly strongly suspected it was the person to whom the ring belonged that Hermione wore on her hand. Deep, raw scratch marks had torn the skin of the back of her hand where the ring was; as if in a fit of delirium she had forgotten she could slip the ring off. Correctly guessing Hermione wanted it off, the elder woman had tried to remove the expensive piece of jewelry, but the thing refused to come off. Molly had no doubt it was charmed to stay on; it grew hot as she tried to pull it off and she shivered-the ring itself felt malevolent, dangerous. Part of her wanted to get Arthur to summon a Curse Breaker to see it, but she would not do it until Hermione woke.

Deeply unnerved and upset, Molly quietly left the room, only to realize her mistake. Harry and Ron stood nearby, apparently waiting to be let in, but once they caught sight of her they rushed forwards, all impatience.

"How is she?" Harry asked.

"We have to see her, Mum," Ron said over him.

“She needs to rest,” Mrs. Weasley replied, trying in vain to recompose herself.

“Is she okay, Mrs. Weasley?”

“Mum, why are you crying? What’s happened to her?”

“That’s enough, boys!” Mrs. Weasley said severely, stunning them into silence. It was an impressive feat. The boys stood several feet above her and yet she always managed to cow them with her temper, as rarely as it happened. “You’ll leave her alone until she says she wants to see you. She’s still healing and needs her rest and will only become agitated if you run in there babbling away. If I so much as see you two near this room again until she’s called for you, I’ll send you to stay with Aunt Muriel. Understood?”

The boys nodded mutely, cast twin worried looks at the door, and departed. Molly sighed, and pressed her knuckles into her eyes.

“Alright, mum?” Charlie asked, coming forwards from his position at the door.

“Yes, yes, dear,” Molly waved him away. “Have you seen your father? Has there been any news on Hermione’s parents?”

“He’s not back yet. There’s been no news yet.”

Molly nodded, and suddenly embraced her son tightly, who looked down at her in surprise before hugging her back.

“I’m going to go to bed,” she said. ‘Have Ginny come get me when Hermione wakes, please.’

“Yes, mum.”

Hermione didn’t wake until late in the evening. The family had all sat themselves down to eat dinner Harry and Ginny had prepared together while Mrs. Weasley slept. Not much was eaten, however. The table was almost silent save for the sounds of them moving about. Fred and George kept mostly silent and to themselves. Charlie had had to leave due to work reasons earlier. Arthur was working double-shifts at the Ministry, and would not be home until morning. Harry and Ron were restless and almost hostile as they waited for the final part of their trio to wake.

“Can we at least go check on her?” Ron asked. “She might need something-we could bring her some food.”

“Stay in your seat, Ronald,” Mrs. Weasley said. “I’ll bring it up to her.”

“Please, there’s no need,” came a quiet, timid voice from the entrance to the kitchen. They all turned at once, and immediately burst into action.

Harry and Ron reached her before anyone else. Ron pulled her into a bear hug, the kind he reserved just for her and Hermione laughed through her tears as he put her down, overjoyed that he was unharmed and alright. She had feared he had died as well in the battle, but here he was, strong as ever. Someone else came forward as she turned away from Ron, and her eyes

followed Harry's movement, not quite registering who it was, but he came to a stop before her and her round, incredulous eyes took him in.

What little colour she had regained since arriving fled her complexion; her mouth gaped and she felt her knees give way underneath her again.

Harry caught her before she reached the ground and crushed her to him in an embrace so tight Hermione had trouble breathing. The others gathered around but Hermione only had eyes for Harry. Hot tears blurred her vision but it was undeniably him, her Harry.

Her hands clasped his as tight as her muscles would allow-it was real, *he* was real, but how? This could not be. Was this all a dream? Harry was dead; she had heard the victorious cry of Voldemort as he announced her best friend's death to the world. What had she missed while Draco snatched her away again?

Hermione broke down in Harry's arms. She had thought she had finished all her crying before; but she had been wrong. It felt like she would never stop crying and she hated it, but she let the tears fall regardless. Futilely blinking his own tears away, Harry cupped the back of her head and tucked her head beneath his chin, pressing kisses and soothing whispers onto the top of her head. Hermione shut her eyes tightly, embarrassed and slightly afraid to look them all in the eye.

"Y-you were d-dead," she gasped, cupping his face between her palms. There was his scar, familiar and permanent. The good green eyes she had missed so. "I heard Vo-*him* say it."

"I know," Harry said, letting her dazed eyes pierce into his, asking hundreds of questions he would answer later. "I was dead, but I came back, Hermione. It was the Horcrux inside me he destroyed-you knew about it, didn't you?"

Hermione nodded, breathing erratically through a suddenly stuffy nose. "I thought I was too late-I thought I would never see you again."

Mrs. Weasley fluttered about, scolding them to leave her alone, that she needed space and they had to be careful, for Merlin's sake! The twins smiled, comforting Ginny, who still felt guilty for not having kept a better eye on Hermione after the Yule Ball of the year past.

"We've been so worried," Harry whispered to her. "I'm so sorry, Hermione, please forgive me-none of this would have happened if we had taken you with us, we-*I* was so stupid."

Hermione could think of nothing to say-it felt like she had forgotten how to speak. She clung to Harry as the room spun around her and vented her sorrow. Upon Mrs. Weasley's request they both stood and made their way to the table. Hermione extracted herself from Harry's arms and allowed Mrs. Weasley to sit her down at the table, where a bowl of hot soup had been served for her.

"Have something to eat, dear," Mrs. Weasley said softly. "It will do you good."

Hermione nodded, brushing away her tears. Her face burned red as she reached for a spoon. Harry and Ron sat themselves beside her and before the calm returned Ginny swept in over Hermione, who jumped as the ginger embraced her.

"I'm so glad you're alright, Hermione," she said shakily. Hermione gave her friend a watery smile and squeezed her in return before Ginny resumed her seat.

“No more of that until after she’s done eating,” Mrs. Weasley said firmly. “Let her alone for now, she’s been through enough.”

Hermione did not feel all that hungry but she forced down the soup anyway, wincing slightly as it burned her still-sore throat going down. They watched her anxiously though they pretended not to, all except Mrs. Weasley, who went on as if nothing was amiss. Hermione understood the woman was trying to help her become at ease, and was immensely grateful. Spoonful after spoonful was gulped down and when there was only a tiny portion left in her bowl, Hermione put down the utensil, feeling better than she had moments ago. Harry held her free hand with both of his, stroking her dry skin softly.

“If you’d like, dear, we can speak in private if you’re uncomfortable.”

Hermione was again grateful to Mrs. Weasley and nodded, shooting a look of apology to the rest, who understood and smiled back as reassuringly as they could. The twins pressed her hands and expressed how glad they were she was safe. Ginny hugged her again before leaving, and Ron and Harry were rising to leave as well when she shook her head at them, beckoning for them to stay.

Once the four of them were alone Mrs. Weasley led them all back to the table, which had been cleared with magic, save for a few cups of tea and some slices of bread and butter, which were laid out before Hermione.

“Are you feeling much better, Hermione?”

Hermione nodded. “Yes, thank you Mrs. Weasley.”

“If you do not want to talk now we will understand.”

Hermione held her tea cup before her, staring down at it intently.

“Please, have my parents been found?”

“Tonks and Mad-Eye have been sent to search for them,” Ron said. “The Order knows you’re here, but we haven’t told anyone else. We felt you might not want that.”

Hermione nodded. “Thank you.”

“Hermione, if you don’t want to talk about this we’ll leave if that’ll make you feel better,” Harry said, motioning to himself and Ron.

“No,” Hermione said. “Stay.”

“Whenever you’re ready, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said gently. “Take your time.”

They waited patiently, bravely as Hermione gathered her nerves and sipped tiny little sips of her tea, urging herself not to cry again.

“After the Yule Ball last year,” she began quietly, ‘I finished cleaning up with Neville and came back to my dorm. I found your note,’ she told Harry, the corners of her mouth turning slightly downwards. “I panicked. I was furious you’d left me behind; I knew you would need me when you left. I realized you had been lying to me since the attack at Hogsmeade-I was angry, I was frightened and upset-I ran after you.”

The memories played out in her mind's eye as she recounted them. Harry and Ron stared at her intently, eyes tight with the guilt of leaving her, with the knowing of what was coming next. Mrs. Weasley listened in silence.

"I remembered where we had planned to Apparate once reaching Hogsmeade-I snuck out of the castle and made my way there in the snow." She swallowed hard. "I didn't realize someone was following me."

"I made it almost to the clearing, I could hear your voices but before I could reach you someone pushed me down. I knocked my head against a stone and the last thing I saw was Filch Apparating me away."

Shock showed on all three of her companion's faces. Their questions were spoken over each other.

"Filch?" "Are you sure?" "Why was he following you?"

"I'm convinced he was under Dra-Malfoy's control," she explained. "Most likely under an Imperius. He was probably following me around in Hogwarts."

"What happened to him?"

"That was the last time I saw him. I assumed he went back to Hogwarts."

Hermione seemed hesitant to continue; Harry reached out and held her hand. The small act gave her enough strength to continue.

"I awoke in a strange room. I didn't know where I was or who had taken me until I saw something that proved it was Draco."

"What was it?"

"A replica of a stained glass window I was fond of at Hogwarts. Only he knew I liked it enough to think I would appreciate having one for my own."

"I knew I had to escape. The only way out was through that window, everything else had been warded off and locked. I broke it and jumped outside. It wasn't so high up, but I hurt myself in the process. I didn't know where I was but I ran away, thinking I might find somewhere I could ask for help. I didn't think to Apparate, but the wards there would have prevented me from doing so anyhow."

"Did you recognize anything at all?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

Hermione shook her head. "It was cold out but there was no snow. There were trees everywhere, everything was green but it felt like Autumn was just starting. There was a shout and I knew it was him." She looked away. "He came after me."

She could feel the cool, sharp grass under her feet again; the burn in her lungs as she gasped for breath, could still hear the rapid footfalls of the man who chased her.

"I entered a field of lavender. I thought I had lost him but he caught up and pushed me down." Hermione pulled her hand from Harry's and let it join the other in her lap. They caught onto each other and twisted fingers anxiously.

“He said I was his and hit me when I refused. He had put the ring on me while I was asleep and said he had used old magic on it to marry us. It was frightening; he spoke like he owned me and would not listen when I pleaded for him to let me go. Said the lands around his home were spelled to not let me escape; the ring itself prevented me from using magic without permission or harming him.”

There was a pregnant pause as she struggled to form the words that came next. The recollection was vivid in her mind; her own screams and the impact of his body shoving into hers without care, the pain she had felt.

“He... he raped me,” she said. Harry’s eyes closed and Ron clenched his fists, staring down angrily at the table. “It hurt so much I passed out and when I woke up the next day he did it again though I begged him not to. Said he would never let me go, that I was his. I was so angry I tried to hit him but the ring wouldn’t let me.”

Harry’s hand inched closer to hers, but Hermione withdrew from his touch.

“He is the one who bit you,” Molly said flatly, looking at Hermione’s shoulder. Hermione shivered, remembering how it had happened, and nodded before pulling a section of hair over it to conceal it.

“Inside his home I had no way of knowing what was happening outside, and unless it was something minor he would not tell me. He kept me there all this time. He forced himself on me almost daily and punished me if I displeased him. About a week after I was kidnapped he took me to see his parents. They were both kind, but unable to help. Mrs. Malfoy was ill; she did not know exactly how I came to be married to her son. She died last month.” Hermione was growing tired, unused to talking for so long—a first for her.

“He took me to be interrogated by Vo-Voldemort. He tortured me but I didn’t tell him anything.” Hermione did not tell them about what else he had done.

“He was already violent before but when his mother died he grew more unstable. He started making offers, trying to tempt me to give in to him but I refused. For that he began giving me Amortentia. For days on end he would make me drink it and I would have almost no memory of what happened during that time. I told him about potential side effects but he ignored me until they started happening. He stopped making me take it but only on the condition that I show him love.” She paused to take in a breath and suppressed a yawn.

“Were the Malfoys the only people you saw in that time?” Harry asked.

“No, I saw Blaise Zabini frequently. He and Dra-Malfoy are close friends, he was allowed to come visit whenever he liked.”

Ron hissed between his teeth. “*That* bastard was there too?”

“I know he didn’t act very courteously towards us in the past,” Hermione said softly. “But if it wasn’t for him I would not be here.”

Ron gawked. “What do you mean?”

“He showed guilt over what he had done, what he had helped Draco accomplish in Sixth Year as well as what he did to me,” she said. “Apparently Draco named him my protector, and said that if I was ever in danger Blaise had full permission to help me however he could. He

was so full of himself he didn't realize he himself was a danger to me, so Blaise helped me out. Before we left I found out from Draco himself about another Horcrux and where it was hidden. I told Blaise I needed to get back to the school, he got me my wand and we used a Portkey to come to Hogwarts. I found the Horcrux and he destroyed it with Fiendfyre. He left after that. We knew he had betrayed Draco's trust, and that he would come after us. Blaise offered to take me with him somewhere safe for the time being but I couldn't go.' She looked at Harry and Ron. "I had to find you."

"We looked for you everywhere once we found out," Harry said. "We also went to the school to look for the Horcrux; we didn't realize the battle was happening on the same day."

Hermione nodded and looked down into her lap again. Now came the hard part.

"I was in the courtyard, behind the rubble because I didn't want to be seen. I heard them say Harry was dead, and I kind of collapsed. After I got up Voldemort's snake found me. It chased me and would have eaten me but someone came and cut its head off with a sword. I didn't get a look at who it was, but could it have been you, Ron?"

"It was Neville," Ron said. "Harry told us to go after the snake. Neville had the sword and I had a fang from the old Basilisk from Second Year."

At the mention of another close friend, Hermione's heart ached.

"Is... Is he alive?" she asked meekly.

"Yeah, I saw him help clean up after the battle with Luna."

Another wave of relief washed over her, but she knew she could not let out that breath just yet. Others had died, she had seen many bodies. But she had to ask.

"Did anyone else...?"

"Percy was killed by the Senior Goyle," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Oh no," Hermione said, feeling her heart sink. Percy was always a little pretentious, but they had always gotten along fairly well until he took that job at the Ministry. "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you, my dear."

Hermione took Mrs. Weasley's shaking hand in her own and squeezed it softly, and did the same with Ron's.

After a mournful silence they straightened, and Hermione sat down again.

Mrs. Weasley was wiping her eyes. "Tell me, dear, what happened to Malfoy? Where is he now?"

Hermione took her elbows off the table, unconsciously curling into herself.

"...After the snake had been killed I heard some noise back in the courtyard. There was someone shouting and I went to look for Ron. I sensed there was someone behind me but by the time I tried to defend myself he had already Apparated me away to the Shrieking Shack."

"So he found you."

"Yes."

“What happened then?”

“...”

“Hermione?”

“He beat me.” Her voice came out so frail and broken; Harry scooted closer and put his arm around her. Hermione stiffened at first but then relaxed into him, fighting not to cry. ‘I couldn’t protect myself, he kicked me over and over and said he had been too lenient with me. He was furious that I had dared to run away from him, and promised when he was through with me I wouldn’t be able to crawl. He said he would punish me for taking Blaise away from him and used the Cruciatus curse on me.’ Harry’s arm tightened around her. “He said he was going to take me home to continue my punishment. I was afraid he would kill me. He had put my wand away but I grabbed it and-and...”

“What, Hermione? What happened?”

The confession came out in a mortified whisper.

“I killed him.”

At last, the tears began to flow again. Hermione was faced with the reality of the crime she had committed. She, a killer! What had she done? She should have just Apparated away and left him there. She had only meant to Stun him! She had not meant to kill him!

Draco had turned her into a killer. It was his entire fault. What was that he’d said about her dream where the same thing had happened?

‘We’ll see what the future holds for your declaration.’

Had he known? Had he planned it to be so? Hermione couldn’t believe it. The genuine rage and shock in his eyes had not been faked, but then, who was she to be judge? It didn’t matter, so long as he was dead and could not hurt her anymore, she told herself. Harry held her, rubbing her back until the tears subsided, which didn’t take so long. When they did he pulled away and looked her in the face.

“You did nothing wrong in killing him, Hermione. He would have killed you or hurt you more than he already had. It was self-defense, okay?” Hermione nodded through her tears. “He’s never going to hurt you again, I promise.”

“Is the body still there?” Ron asked carefully.

“Y-yes.”

Ron looked at his mother. “I’ll take Fred and George with me to get the body. Should we take it to Lucius?”

Mrs. Weasley spoke in a whisper but Hermione still heard her words. “Lucius Malfoy didn’t survive the battle. I think it best to take the body to the Ministry.”

More sadness. Lucius had been so kind to her, and now he was dead. The whole Malfoy family was gone. Harry let her place her head on his shoulder, holding her as she cried.

Ron left quickly to gather the twins before going to the Shrieking Shack.

“Alright, dear,” Mrs. Weasley spoke up. ‘You’ve tired yourself out; it’s time for bed. We’ll talk more tomorrow.’

“Yes, okay,” Hermione said. She and Harry stood together. Harry walked her to her bedroom, but before he could step inside after her Mrs. Weasley gestured for him to wait a moment.

“I need to speak with her in private for a moment, dear.”

“Of course,” he said, and waited outside as she shut the door.

Hermione turned to face Mrs. Weasley.

“Sit down, Hermione dear, please, I’m worried your strength is not totally back yet.”

After Hermione sat on the side of the bed, Mrs. Weasley sat beside her and wound her arm around Hermione’s shoulders. The younger witch rested her head against the other woman, gazing blankly at the wall opposite them.

“I examined you when you were brought in. I found signs of assault on your body, and noticed you had tried to claw off that ring.”

Hermione’s hand twitched at the mention of the ring.

“I can’t ever get it off now,” she said hollowly. “Only he could take it off.”

“We will do whatever we can to find a way,” Mrs. Weasley assured her. “Would you like if Mr. Weasley looked into hiring a Curse Breaker for you?”

“Would that work?”

“I don’t know, dear. But it could at least get rid of some of the enchantments on that ring. I tried myself, but it’s very dark, ancient magic, I’m afraid. Do you want to try it?”

Hermione nodded. “Yes, thank you.”

“Another thing, Hermione-You’ve been in captivity with him for several months. You have been through a horrifying ordeal-I am worried his treatment towards you may have resulted in some psychological as well as physical disturbance. Do you think seeking professional help would help you? Or at least seeing an advanced Healer?”

“No, no,” Hermione shook her head. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore. I just want it all to go away as quickly as possible, please.”

“All right then,” Mrs. Weasley said, pressing a kiss to Hermione’s temple before rising from the bed. “If you need anything, dear, you know where I’ll be.

“Thank you for everything, Mrs. Weasley.”

Mrs. Weasley beamed. “Shall I send Harry in?”

There was a moment’s hesitation, but at last Hermione nodded, and Mrs. Weasley exited the room.

When Harry entered the room he found Hermione standing before the window, cupping her elbows in a self-embrace. She looked so lost it tore at him to see it.

“You must be revolted by me,” she said in a wavering voice.

“I’ve loved you for almost as long as I’ve known you,” Harry said in reply. “You will get through this, Hermione. You are not what happened to you.”

Her shoulders dropped at his words and she turned away from the window to face him.

“I didn’t mean to kill him, I swear! I only wanted to Stun him!”

“I believe you.”

“Why did you leave me behind?” she asked. “You shouldn’t have lied to me.”

“I know. I regretted it the moment we left the castle. If I had known you followed us we would have waited. We would have gone back to look for you. We never should have left you alone, I’m sorry.”

He stood still as she approached him slowly and stared up at him with haunted eyes. Her thin arms still held herself tightly as though she had been split into two halves and was desperate to stay whole.

“You were all I ever thought about,” came her whisper. “I worried about you and Ron every day and night I was with him. Every time he smiled at me I was sure he was going to tell me you were dead. Often when he was angry with me he would threaten to kill you or Neville to get me to do what he wanted,” her voice broke off.

Harry pulled her to him, his hands spread out high on her back.

“I’m here,” he breathed. “I’m here, and I’m never going to leave you again.”

Hermione’s body sagged with relief; Harry picked her up carefully and sat her down on the bed against the headboard. The bright saffron coloured blanket underneath her emphasized the unhealthy pallor of her skin, the faint blue veins that swam up the thin skin on her legs.

“Will you stay?”

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable,” Harry said.

“I know I’m safe with you,” was her reply. “You don’t feel like him.”

The bed was soft and warm underneath him but she was softer and warmer. Harry sat next to her, making sure to keep a little space between them.

“I feel like a stranger to myself,” her dry lips quivered. ‘He found ways to make me respond to him Harry, when he... when he touched me. Even though I hated him more than anything he made my body like it.’ A fat teardrop splashed onto the fabric covering her breast. “He made me dirty, and since the first time I doubt I will ever feel like myself again.” Large brown eyes turned onto his pleadingly. “Truly, Harry. I never wanted it, never.”

Harry’s hand found hers, grasped it. “I believe you.”

“He took control of my life once already,” she said, her voice growing softer, “I won’t ever let him do it again. I want to pretend none of it ever happened,” her hand twitched again and dove underneath the blanket.

Nothing more was said. The silence between them grew but it was not unpleasant. The moon rose high above the Burrow, revealing things better kept hidden. Hermione fell asleep first, leaning against Harry, her head resting against his chest. Harry was careful not to startle her awake. Their hands were still entwined on the bedspread. The room was not cold but eventually she began to shiver; Harry summoned a spare blanket from the foot of the bed to cover her with as he himself was unable to sleep.

So many thoughts kept him awake, the one appearing most frequent being he was extremely sorry he had not been the one to kill Draco Malfoy.

Percy's funeral took place later on that week. Harry had chipped in to buy him a handsome casket, to which neither Mr. or Mrs. Weasley protested. Only the immediate family came, since there were so many other funerals happening at the same time. Harry, Hermione and Ron stood with Fred and George, who had not cracked a single joke since the battle. As they all went to pay their final respects, Harry saw them each place a fake rubber wand into their brother's coffin. Harry was sure Percy would have liked that had he been alive to see it.

The day after the funeral two unexpected visitors came to the Burrow. Hermione had just returned from the gardens when something collided into her and wrapped strong arms around her.

Immediately Hermione panicked. "Please-no!" she said, trying to pull away. Terror gripped her as the person pulled away and she flinched, awaiting the strike that would surely come. Her eyes shut-she didn't want to see those terrifying eyes.

"Hermione? I'm sorry-Hermione!"

That voice! She opened her eyes, and the terror fled her.

"Oh thank goodness!" She threw her arms around him and he laughed.

"You're okay! I knew you would be! I would have come to see you sooner but I didn't find out you had been found until today and I informed the Professor and we came as fast as we could."

"The Professor?"

Just then Hermione noticed Professor McGonagall rise from her seat at the kitchen table.

"I confess when I saw you at the battle, Miss Granger, I could not quite believe it," she said before coming forward to embrace Hermione. "I was sure someone had played a trick on me."

"I would have gone back to see you," Hermione said earnestly. "But I was looking for Harry and Ron."

"Malfoy kidnapped you, didn't he?" Neville asked. "When I get my hands on that slimy snake—"

"Mister Longbottom!"

"It's alright, Professor," Hermione said. To Neville, she said, "It's too late. He's dead."

Only Neville was taken by surprise. "How?"

Hermione looked uneasy. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Of course. Sorry."

Professor McGonagall stepped forward. "I understand the body was not found?"

"No." Ron and the twins had come back from the Shrieking Shack empty handed.

"There was old blood on the floor," Ron had said. "That must have been yours, Hermione. But there was no body."

The news had unsettled them all greatly until someone suggested someone from the Ministry might have found the body before them.

Hermione was inclined to believe this. She related to them the noises she had heard outside the Shack after Draco had fallen down, the unmistakable sound of someone running towards the Shack.

"Does this mean they're looking for me?" she'd asked, frightened.

"I doubt it," Harry had said then. "Anyone could have done it as long as they didn't see you. Besides, from what you've told us he was Voldemort's new right hand. I think they wouldn't care who killed him so long as he was gone."

"Could this mean he's still alive?" Neville asked. Hermione's breath caught.

The Professor frowned. "Nonsense. Perhaps another follower found him and took the body where one of us could not find it."

Their visit did not last long. The Professor had already been informed of what had happened by Molly, whom had received permission from Hermione before doing so. Neville had not been filled in, but he had not been picked Head Boy for nothing, he could put two and two together.

"I'll come back often," he promised her.

"Do," Hermione said. "I've missed you so much."

During Neville's second visit, Hermione relayed to him the threat Draco had made to her about wanting to find Neville.

"I was so worried," she said. "I didn't see you at the battle and thought he had found you."

Neville was pleased when she told him it was her he had saved from Nagini in the courtyard, and shocked when he heard about how Blaise had helped with the Horcrux.

"Zabini, of all people!" he remarked.

"I am greatly indebted to him," Hermione said. "But I don't know where I might find him."

Neville confessed he had not seen Blaise since the Slytherin had caught him outside the Room of Requirement, and Hermione was left to search on her own.

Mr. and Mrs. Granger still had not been found. Hermione preferred to view this as a sign that she had hidden them successfully rather than face the unpleasant thought that lurked in the back of her mind.

Mr. Weasley was still looking into finding a Curse Breaker. They explained Bill would have liked to help, but was working on something currently for Gringotts. Harry had insisted he would pay for the service, despite Hermione's protestations, but was forced to relent as he would not give in. As well as this, Mr. Weasley and Ron were looking to find the particular spell that had bound her to him.

"All modern marriage spells won't work unless both partners are willing," Mrs. Weasley explained to a confused Hermione. "The one on that ring is ancient; it might take some time to find which one. You were not awake when he performed it?"
"No."

"Perhaps it might be in the Malfoy Manor," Ron spoke up. "We could get a warrant to search their library to see if they might have a book with the spell in it."

This idea was taken up quickly and the Ministry was applied to.

Harry and Hermione were constantly together. They slept in the same room but made clear nothing happened between them. Harry slept on a cot beside her so as to not trouble her. It pained him to see how she suffered from what had happened to her. It had not been so clear at first but the signs grew more evident with each passing day.

Any sudden movement or loud exclamation caused her to flinch and shrink away. Often, she herself noticed when this happened and tried to correct it or pass it off with a strained smile but they all took care not to startle her. Once she had tripped going down the steps alongside Ron, and Ron had grabbed her around the waist to stop her from falling. She pushed away rather violently and red-faced, Ron hastened to apologize. She begged him to forgive her rudeness instead, knowing he had meant well, and rushed to lock herself in her room with her heart still racing.

The bossy, bright Gryffindor was gone, replaced by a quiet, frightened kitten. Ginny spent lots of time with her and found the change most distressing. She had not known Draco Malfoy very well but she hated him with a passion that burned as red as her hair for what he had done to her friend.

Hermione took a dreamless sleeping draught each night to prevent the night terrors from coming back, but each morning she woke with the ghostly feeling of his hands on her, his breath brushing harshly against her cheek. Sometimes she fancied she saw him. At Percy's funeral, behind the garden gate as she took a walk, the first time she dared venture back into Diagon Alley he was every third stranger she passed, waiting at every corner she turned. She had to mentally shake herself each time it happened.

He's dead, she repeated to herself. *Dead*. You did it, you saw it happen. He can't come back.

He was gone and she would heal. The task was daunting, as every day she was reminded in some way or another how she had been affected by him and she felt it would extraneous effort to get past it all.

She would be strong again. She would heal.

A/N:

You know, I always feel like I am spelling Weaseley wrong.

NINJA EDIT: I was spelling it wrong. I am so embarrassed ohmygod. Thanks to iwillsingyoulullabies for kindly pointing it out!

Also thanks to Grovek26 for reminding me that Bill is, in fact, a Curse Breaker! Well, we'll just pretend he's too busy working on something to be able to help Hermione.

Reviews are as welcome as a nice pair of wool socks. (Brrrr.)

Holy molasses that took a long time to write. Definitely one of the longer chapters I've written so far.

Thank you so much for all the reviews on the previous two chapters! You guys are rockstar reviewers!
I'm glad the last chapter left such an impression on some of you. Like I said, there is still more to this story that must be explained before it ends.

Feel free to theorize as much as you want, bring along your tin foil hats if you like.

You all have such marvelous ideas; I'm really enjoying reading each one as it comes in, but in the end I hope you won't be disappointed by how I plan to end this story.

So please no hate towards each other! No fighting! Everyone can contribute as long as they are respectful of the other's opinions. This is not a contest, my dears. Until the end comes no one is wrong.

(I don't really care if you swear in your reviews-I myself swear quite a bit and there is swearing in this story after all. Swearing at others is frowned upon here, though.)

There are 2-3 chapters left in this story.

Cheers,

Charlotte

FINAL EDIT: Jeez, guys, I only asked for *one* small thing. Attacking the other reviewers is not ok.

THREATENING OTHER REVIEWERS WILL NOT BE TOLERATED.

I don't care if you disagree with their theory on what might happen-either courteously and respectfully submit your own take (on draco's death) in a review or KEEP IT TO YOURSELF.

I've deleted some reviews and will continue to delete more if this problem continues.

BE RESPECTFUL. BE COURTEOUS. BE KIND. IF YOU CAN'T BE ALL OF THEM CHOOSE ONE.

This is a site where we all come to read and share our works or ideas; being hostile towards each other only sets us back.

37. Catalyst

I own nothing of the Harry Potter universe. All rights go to JK Rowling.

There's a Rated R bit further on down.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Catalyst

“Here I am, and I stand so tall,
Just the way I’m supposed to be,
But you’re onto me
And all over me...”
Gravity-Sara Bareilles

Nearly a month had passed, and little progress was made. Hermione found herself wearing thin.

It’s going to take time for you to feel better, she reprimanded herself each time she began to feel anxious. You weren’t really expecting everything to go back to normal so quickly, were you?

Of course not. But I feel like I am losing my mind. I still hear his voice so clearly, like he’s with me. I feel him whenever someone touches me.

It had been alright at first, when she had been ecstatic at finding out Harry was alive and being surrounded by those she had missed so much while trapped with Draco. Harry held her hand at every opportunity and comforted her when she did not want to sleep. They had spoken in private and discussed their relationship one night a few days after her arrival. Neither had felt like sleeping, Hermione’s Dreamless Sleeping Draught stood shunned on the bedside table and they faced each other on the bed without saying a word afterwards, the bumps and folds of the blanket beneath them separated them like a canyon made of cloth.

They had agreed there would be no intimacy between them until Hermione felt herself healed enough to do it. Harry would never pressure her to do anything she did not want to. If he did anything that made her uncomfortable she was to inform him at once.

Harry longed to hold her, to be able to touch her like he once could without repercussion. When he looked at her sad mouth he wanted to kiss her until she smiled again, until the stars in her eyes lost their dullness and recovered their bright enthusiasm. It pained him to see how she had changed, how she walked around with a tense, frightened posture, like prey awaiting

the pounce of its pursuer. Time and time again he wondered if he should take her for counseling, he was sure she would benefit from it, but whenever the subject was raised Hermione grew agitated and refused.

Neville visited several times each week to see how Hermione was doing. Harry, Ron and Ginny often accompanied them while everyone else went to work. But he had not come for the past few days. His Grandmother was to visit America and the task of seeing her settled safely there had befallen onto him.

Strangely, Mr. Weasley was having difficulty finding a Curse Breaker to remove the spells from Hermione's ring. Everyone was occupied, apparently, so they would have to wait. Not only that, her parents had yet to be found. Tonks and Mad-Eye had sent quick notes to her, promising they were working hard to find Mr. and Mrs. Granger and send them back to her.

Hermione fervently hoped they would hurry. She dearly wanted to see them. She wasn't so keen on telling them what had happened to her, but good Mrs. Weasley promised she would help. Some nights Hermione imagined her mother was with her, stroking her hair as she used to, singing the quiet lullabies she had not heard since she was a little girl. She imagined her father's arms, solid and sure, around her, surrounding her in safety. These daydreams helped comfort her a little, but she preferred the real thing.

The warrant to search the Malfoy Manor had been speedily granted, and a group of Aurors and Order Members had been dispatched to complete the task. They had been given two days to look through the great manse, but nothing had been found aside from a few dark magic trinkets found in Lucius's study that had nothing to do with what they were after. The items were illegal, but since their owner was deceased there was no one to fine so the items were merely taken into the Ministry and destroyed.

Narcissa Malfoy's grave was found in the orchard behind the house. After they left Lucius was buried alongside his wife and the Manor was left as it had been found, and Hermione's hope dimmed a little more. With the lowering of her hopes, her desperation grew.

Twice Hermione had attempted to cut off her own finger. The ring had prevented her from harming herself in the past, but who knew, she reasoned with herself, perhaps it had changed. She had been able to kill Draco; that should not have been possible with the ring. She dared hope its spells were wearing off. Being short one finger was a small price to pay for complete freedom.

Each attempt brought forward no result. Hermione could use all her might to hold the knife in her hand but somehow it would slip through her fingers like it was slathered in oil. It had taken all her strength and power, but just once she managed to bring it down inches away from her finger. Still, that same peculiar force that had prevented her punches and strikes from reaching Draco made it impossible for her to cut away the offending appendage.

Harry had encountered a desolate Hermione minutes later. It was lucky there was no one else around, for blinded by fury and despair she had flung the knife across the room to stick into the wall. The knife was taken down and the wall speedily mended before anyone noticed, and Harry had endeavored for several minutes to calm her down.

"I just want it off," she had whimpered into his shoulder after she had buried her face into his chest. "I can't stand thinking he still has a claim on me even though he's dead."

“He doesn’t own you, Hermione. We’ll find a way to get it off,” Harry promised, but deep inside he wasn’t quite sure. What if they never did? Hermione had had ample time to find a way to get rid of the ornament whilst in captivity, if she had found nothing, who was to say they would? Working with Voldemort no doubt had given Malfoy resources none of them were likely to find unless if by some miracle they were able to find out exactly where Malfoy had hidden himself and Hermione.

For the thousandth time Harry cursed himself for having left her behind. Probably Malfoy never would have suspected them leaving the school to search for the Horcruxes. It would have given them a good head start to flee and hide themselves securely enough that it would have been a hard task indeed to find them. He and Ron went from place to place to avoid being found and not once had an intruder stumbled upon them, if not counting the Polyjuice wearing off inside the Ministry or the anti-disguise traps setting off inside Gringotts, but that was different. Malfoy would have been too focused on finding her inside the school and even if he had found out about their Horcrux hunt, he would never have known where to find them.

Yet he had so arrogant as to believe he was in charge of Hermione’s wellbeing, that he could decide what was best for her. How had he not caught that before? What an idiot he was.

No wonder she had been so angry after finding the note. How much she must have hated him then! Though she had insisted several times before she did not hate him for it he suspected she did. If it hadn’t been for him she never would have been taken.

Harry shut his eyes angrily, willing the thought away. They had already talked about this! If these obtrusive thoughts could just go away he would be able to sleep more soundly at night. Neither of them could have known what would happen that night. Neither had known about the spy inside Hogwarts. Adding to that, none of them could have guessed how in just one night all their lives would change.

At some point in the night she had kicked off all her sheets. It was *hot*, so hot inside the room that the fabric clung to her wet skin. The open window provided no relief; the sun was just beginning to rise outside but there was no breeze to be felt. Her long hair was lank and stuck to her arms as she sat up, pulling the sheets away from her body. The nightie she wore (borrowed from Ginny) was made for summer, consisting of thin material but still she’d sweated through it.

Hermione looked over to Harry, who was still asleep on his cot. It appeared he was not suffering from the heat as much as she was. His face was shiny with perspiration but he had kept his sheets on his body. One arm was slung over his face to shield his eyes from the growing light of the sun, which made visible the damp patch under his arm.

If only there was a fan in the room. She sighed, and swung her legs over the side of the bed, gathering her hair off her neck and back, waving her other hand back and forth to cool herself down.

She had gone to sleep earlier than usual the night before, taking the Dreamless Sleeping Draught just as she should, but it had worn off some time before morning and a dream had blossomed before her eyes, paralyzing her with fear.

It was not like the other night terrors she had experienced before, but it was just as bad. Hermione glanced down at her hand, where the blasted ring sparkled in the weak light. Had it been only the dream, or had she really felt it grow cold? Was that what had woken her?

No, it was his voice. A splash of ice ran through her veins.

What did he say? She couldn't remember. She had barely heard it her mind was so groggy, but it was his voice, she was sure of it.

Hermione looked around uneasily. There was no one but Harry.

It's just memories, she told herself calmly. Memories and nothing more.

The reflected light from the gemstones on the ring landed on her eye, and Hermione blinked and turned away.

Unbidden, his voice disrupted the quiet shakiness of her mind.

'I own you,' he said softly. 'The ring on your finger and the Malfoy crest on your arm prove it. You are my wife and I can do what I wish to you.'

Hermione scowled down at her hand. *You don't own me. You cannot control me.*

One miracle had been granted her, at least. In the midst of all she had been through, the one thing that gave her some happiness was that he had not impregnated her. Hermione had taken a contraceptive potion every day while at the Manor, but still ridden with worry she had asked for help. Molly had been so kind as to perform spells to make sure and after several excruciating minutes Hermione was at last left in silence, weak with relief that he had not managed to completely take over her body in a way that would have been so totally undesirable to her.

A light snore distracted her and Hermione looked up as Harry rolled onto his back, his arms dropping to his sides. The cot creaked underneath his every movement.

If he moves again he'll fall off, Hermione thought, rubbing the back of her hand roughly against her thigh.

Another snore from him made the corners of her mouth turn up in a tiny smile as she watched him. That cot looked quite uncomfortable-perhaps she should invite him to share her bed?

Moving quickly, Hermione made her way over to him, bending down and shaking him a little to wake him.

"Harry."

He turned his head away, mumbling something she couldn't make out.

"Harry." More vigorous shaking.

"Yeah." Green eyes opened slowly and he looked at her for a moment before the worry set in. He sat up quickly. 'What is it? Is something wrong?'

"Nothing's wrong," she said. "It's just that it's so hot and that cot looks uncomfortable. Do you want to sleep on my bed?"

"I think it would be better if I slept here, Hermione."

"I want you to," she said quietly, looking down at her feet.

Harry pushed his hair off his forehead, revealing the lightning-bolt scar. "Help me up?"

Hermione bit her cheek to hide a smile and held out her hands for him to grab. Using a gentle grip, Harry latched on and stood, wobbling on unsteady legs for a moment before stepping away slightly to stretch, pushing his fists upwards and arching his back as he yawned widely. Hermione watched, feeling something inside her flutter a little before she looked away rapidly, highly aware of the faint blush rising under her skin.

"Are you sure you want me on your bed?" Harry asked, slurring his words slightly with a tongue still thick from sleep. 'I snore, according to Ron.'

"Between the two of you he snores loudest," Hermione said. "I don't mind."

They sat on the bed together, side by side. Outside, the sky grew lighter.

"It's so bloody hot," Harry said, pinching the moist fabric of his shirt away from his stomach.

Hermione nodded, not quite paying attention. Her eyes were focused on his lips.

Noticing her silence, Harry turned to face her. "Are you okay?"

Her lips pressed onto his, soft and smooth as a flower petal. After she had pulled back, Harry looked at her curiously.

"I love you, Harry."

A smile spread on his face, warming her all over. It was nothing like the sticky unpleasantness of the climate, this was pleasing and... *happy*. Her hand throbbed with pain, though. The ring had pinched tighter around her finger, making her hand jerk with the pain but she made herself ignore it.

He reached for her with an inquiring look and understanding it, she nodded her assent.

As his arms came around her she became aware of the instinctual tensing of her limbs and tightening of her mouth but she shook it off angrily.

This is Harry, she reminded herself. He's not going to hurt you.

The tension was stubborn, however, and would not leave, but Hermione reasoned that so long as she was able to bear his touch she was fine.

So far so good.

His lips pressed onto her temple, and she raised her chin to meet his mouth better. He paused before he kissed her, asking another question with his eyes.

"I'm sure," she said. "I want this." It meant the world to her that he had asked, even if it had been wordless. Persuaded, Harry bowed his head to let their lips meet. The moment it happened a jolt of pain went through her, emanating from the ring and Hermione hissed into Harry's mouth, she arched into him in her body's instinctual movement to distance itself away from the hurt.

Harry pulled back immediately. "Did I hurt you? Are you alright?"

"No and yes," she panted, blinking the wetness from her eyes. It wasn't fair.

When he began to pull away Hermione grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him closer, fuelled by anger.

"Please, don't," she said. "I really am okay."

It was clear he didn't believe her. To show him, Hermione pushed him down onto the bed and they scooted towards its center so his legs did not hang off the side.

His green eyes assessed her as she crawled atop him, straddling him at the waist.

A little unsure of what to do, Hermione decided to slip her hands underneath his shirt, drawing them upwards to lay flat against his hot chest. She felt the shiver of pleasure that ran through him, saw him briefly close his eyes. They snapped back open when she leaned forward to kiss his neck.

"Hermione," he began, but was unable to finish because she brought herself back up a little to kiss him on the mouth again. He returned it eagerly, holding her face in his palms to still her for a moment.

"We are not going to do anything you don't want to," he said. "Tell me when you want to stop."

She nodded solemnly, surprised at the excitement she felt growing inside her rather than the dread.

"You're comfortable?"

"Yes." She kissed him again, her hands roamed along his chest and down his stomach. Draco felt like stone compared to Harry-cold, sharp and hard. Harry had muscle too, but he was so warm underneath her she felt she might catch fire if they continued, there was no malice in his eyes and when he kissed her it felt like taking a great breath of air after being underwater for too long. The ring was burning her, it pulsed horribly on her finger and shot more bolts of pain down her arm but she again she refused to take notice of the pain. Draco had taken so much from her already; she would not let him take this away from her too.

You don't own me.

His hands were on her breasts, kneading them gently in his hands and cupping them close together, rubbing his thumb over the fabric that covered her nipples. Again, uneasiness rose inside her and she nearly panicked. At the same time her whole left arm flared with pain, she had to bite her lip hard to keep from screaming. Her right hand contracted and she scratched Harry quite by accident, but not deep enough to tear the skin. Harry sucked in a breath at the sensation, pushing his hips up.

Now her head was hurting. Quite a lot, actually. But she was determined not to stop. She would prove that ghost held no power over her. Harry had noticed her pause and withdrew his hands from her quickly, watching her with alert eyes.

"I'm fine," she insisted, though Harry had yet to ask. "I'm fine."

“Hermione, you look a little ill.”

“I don’t feel it,” she lied. It was so damned hot inside the room, though!

“We can stop right now,” Harry said. “I can go get you some water.”

“No,” she repeated. “I’m fine.” She wanted to keep going.

Sliding herself downwards a little, Hermione began to push down his pyjama pants, revealing the boxers underneath. Harry’s hands settled on her hips and moved upwards to her waist, her breasts, her shoulders. Quickly, they worked to pull the fabric off him, Harry sucked in a sharp breath as she took him in her hand. Heat was growing inside her, swooping her stomach and making her breaths short, unsteady, her hands. There was that wetness too; she felt it as it dampened her knickers.

“Hermione,” he breathed, pushing his head down against the bed as she gave him a slow stroke. A moan burst from his throat as she bent down.

That small action, the way he had moaned her name made her feel powerful. It felt good. Hermione removed her hand and drew back, struggling to remove the piece of fabric from her lower half. The knickers were dropped to the floor and she crawled back atop Harry, who pulled her in for a kiss. It was nothing like the devouring, controlling kisses Draco took from her, Harry’s were loving and she took as much from him as he took from her.

“You don’t have to do this, Hermione,” he said, though he let out a groan when she pulled up the bottom of her nightie and rubbed herself against his exposed length. He could feel her warmth on him; how her lower lips glided along his hard cock, coating him with her pleasure and his hands found their way up to her hips to join her own, which still held the hem of her nightgown.

Her head rolled back, both from the pleasure and pain. Her head was swimming now, it took more effort to get the air into her lungs and she couldn’t feel her left arm anymore. The pain was like a poisoned barb, stuck fast inside her and releasing its lethal juice with every action she made. It was strange, she could feel it spreading into her chest and it was awful, like the blood on her veins had been replaced with a liquid form of the Crucio that was tolerable now but no doubt grew steadily stronger inside her. Her body began to shake and she could feel the rage coming, the tears blurred her vision so that all she could see of Harry was the black of his hair. Hermione fought to keep her composure, what little she had left, and clenched her jaw tight to keep the scream that was building inside her silent.

Her mind was screaming for her to stop, but Hermione was reluctant. If she did she would be giving Draco what he wanted.

‘I claimed you. No matter what happens you will always be mine.’

No, she thought. Never.

‘No one is ever going to take you away from me,’ he’d told her. *‘I will kill anyone that tries.’*

I left you, she thought, grabbing hold of Harry’s hands and pulling them down to where their bodies almost met to help guide him inside her. *I killed you.*

Harry had sensed something was amiss. Hermione really did look ill. Gently, he pulled their hands away to rest on his abdomen. Hermione's eyes met his. They looked pained and a little angry.

"I think we should stop," he said. "I don't think this is a good idea, Hermione."

Why was he so eager to stop? Hermione felt crushed. Did he not want her anymore? Had he lied when he said he did not think she was disgusting?

"Why isn't this good idea?" she asked a little defensively. Her head was pounding viciously now. It took effort to stay upright as she was. 'I'm trying to get over what happened,' she sniffed loudly. "Isn't that what we all wanted?"

"You're pushing yourself too much. You need time, Hermione." He reached up to cup her face in his palms, brushing away her tears with his thumbs. "I love you, but if you're doing this just to prove something to yourself I don't think it will help you."

"I'm not pushing myself," she insisted, pulling her hands from his grip suddenly. "You don't want me, do you? Dr-he's tainted me and you want someone who isn't *dirty*."

"No—"

"Don't lie to me!" she hissed, and pushed off him, scrambling backwards until her feet hit the floor and she was standing again, wrapping her arms around herself. "I disgust you, don't I? I'm dirty and used and D-Draco was right," she backed again until she could go no further, having hit the wall, and slid down until she sat at the floor with her knees to her chest. Harry pulled his pants back on and approached her cautiously with sad eyes.

"He was right," she spoke to the floor. Her voice was faint, broken.

No one would want her because he had touched her. He had never said it directly but oh, he had implied it often enough, most of the time without saying anything at all.

"You're not dirty, Hermione," Harry was saying, but Hermione could not hear him because Draco's voice came back to her, clearer than her own voice.

'You can turn that pretty head away all you want, you can hate me for as long as you like, but never forget that I am your husband, and you belong to me.'

"No..." she moaned, pressing her fists to her temples as if that pressure would squeeze out the memories. Why couldn't he have just left her alone? It wasn't fair! Killing him should have ended this, it should have destroyed the influence he held over her life.

Furious, Hermione struck the metal edge of the nearest leg of Harry's cot with the back of her left hand, brought back her arm and hit it again three more times in succession before Harry pulled her away, trying to force the ring off but it did not budge and she only succeeded in hurting herself. The pain in her arm had lessened but her head still ached and her tummy hurt. She could feel her arm again (in fact, the feeling to it had returned the moment she had left Harry) but now it throbbed and her hand bled from being slammed against the rough metal of the cot.

"Leave me alone!" she shouted. In the back of her mind she cringed at how crazed she sounded. Was she shouting at Harry or Draco's memory inside her head? Harry had pulled her back to the bed and sat her down, restraining her wild fists until she quieted down.

"Take a deep breath, Hermione," he was saying. "I'm here with you; I'm not going to leave you. Whatever Malfoy told you is a lie."

There was a void growing inside her—perhaps it had always been there—sucking in every word he said though she clung desperately to them, wanting to believe him.

You have to fight; a voice spoke up inside her. *Fight it, Hermione. Don't let what Draco did ruin your life.*

There was a long pause before she spoke again. "I'm sorry," she said, covering her face with her hands. "I don't know what came over me. I just—"

"You need more time," he repeated softly. "It doesn't get better right away, Hermione. I know you're afraid, but you're going to have to be strong."

"I *am* strong," she said. *At least, I used to be.*

"You are," Harry agreed. "You are one of the strongest people I know, Hermione. I love you, and I'll be here to help you for as long as it takes. What happened to you wasn't your fault."

Her eyes closed and she nodded at her lap. The ring had gone cold again.

After that Hermione asked that she not be touched. It was too upsetting, it reminded her too much of Draco, who had spent much of their time together touching her. Hermione knew it had been his own way of constantly reminding her who she "belonged" to, her own unwanted reminders of whom she was with. And Harry had been right—she'd been pushing herself to heal too quickly. Her hatred of the ring, Draco's claim of ownership drove her half-mad whenever she looked at it. She had wanted to prove he had no more control over her, but had hurt herself in the process.

It was for the best that she wait until she could get the ring taken off. Its effects frightened her, she wondered what else might have happened if she and Harry had actually had sex. Shame for what she had done kept her silent for several days, unwilling to see anyone or venture outside her room. During this time she suffered two panic attacks. It had been lucky Harry had walked in to find her while the first was happening, he had been able to help her through it but she was not so lucky when the second came. She had been in the shower and nearly fell when it gripped her, covering her mouth to not make a sound over the racket of the shower as the room spun around her, the fear building in her throat would not let her breathe. She had lingered in the steamed bathroom long after it had ended, her skin felt cold as ice and felt too unsteady to stand.

The Weasleys and Harry watched her carefully, making sure to always let her know she had their support when she needed it. Hermione was excessively grateful for this, but kept to herself out of shame more often than not. She ate little and would have slept less had it not been for the sleeping potions she was provided.

Everyone told her it wasn't her fault, what Draco had done to her, but Hermione could not help but wonder. Before she had escaped Draco, the only thing she had been able to think about was escaping. Now that she had accomplished it she had time for other thoughts.

Perhaps it was better to say these thoughts had time for her, since they came up so often though she preferred they didn't. Now that Draco was gone she knew he would never harm her again, but it didn't stop the fear that still constantly plagued her. Not only that-oftentimes she found herself wondering how things might have been different. If she had not been such a know-it-all, if she had not been bent on achieving scholastic perfection as a child, might he ever have noticed her? She was convinced the answer was in the negative. If she had never paid him attention and not allowed his teasing and taunts to bother her then he might have left her alone. If she had been plain, quiet and averse to confrontation then he never would have been drawn to her. Hermione remembered the times when her temper had flared in his presence-the most obvious example being the first time she had slapped him. Up until that point he had never really paid attention to her, she realized. He'd thrown the 'Mudblood' slur at her often, but that had been it, hadn't it? Aside from the jabs at her teeth, hair and braininess, of course, but he had never really honed in on her until after that slap. Without knowing it she had triggered the catalyst for the beginnings of an obsession that would not truly bloom until their sixth year.

The slap had felt so satisfying, she remembered the feel of his smooth, cold cheek beneath her palm, the mutinous, enraged look on his stupid face... She had played it off but had preened about it a bit afterwards, fancying she had knocked him down at last.

How she regretted that now. If only she still had her Time Turner...

She spent so much time outside, a little ways past the garden where the shade of the trees and the messy little hedges could not touch her and she nearly drowned herself in the light of the sun whenever possible. Molly encouraged this, for though having regained most of her health Hermione was still as pale as the day she had come back to them-but she did make sure Hermione put on lotions to protect her skin.

When she didn't feel like going outside Hermione liked to accompany Ginny inside her room. Hermione liked to sit and listen to Ginny talk about anything. Sometimes she participated with little comments here and there or participated in full dialogue. On darker days she stayed completely silent. Ginny didn't talk on these days, knowing without asking silence was what her friend needed, and was happy to provide it.

Ron tried to teach Hermione how to play Wizard's Chess but she was terrible at it, which really wasn't much of a surprise. For years, both Harry and Ron had struggled to teach her but the game held no interest for her. The twins often assured her that her help would be greatly appreciated in the formulating of some new products and she was welcome to come by their shop any time. They had bought an apartment for the two of them to experiment and sometimes live in, since the loud goings on of the makings of their creations would upset Hermione, who often felt guilty about having displaced them though they assured her they had no trouble with it. Both Harry and Hermione helped Mrs. Weasley cook the meals whenever they could.

Little by little by little Hermione's progress inched along to getting better. Some days were better than others, other days felt like she had accomplished nothing at all. Overall her future seemed brighter than before and she felt almost sure she would one day get past it.

And then the package arrived.

38. The Deal With The Devil

All related to Harry Potter belongs to JK Rowling.

Remember the warnings. They apply for this chapter. Remember what I've said over and over about this story.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: The Deal

*"Lost be found
I'm a bloodhound, born for seeking
Poor prey, you must be tired
Stood your ground
But your airtight drums were bleeding
And now it's all on fire"*

Lie to Me-Sara Bareilles

The package was on her bed when she came back inside from another walk around the garden. Harry, Ron, Ginny and the twins had stayed outside to play a bit of Quidditch. Mr. Weasley was off at the Ministry and Mrs. Weasley was at Bill and Fleur's. There was not much sun that day, grey clouds hung over the sky, blocking out its warmth, to Hermione's displeasure. She had come inside to grab a cardigan, but paused upon catching sight of the mysterious small brown parcel on her bed.

She rushed to it, expecting more news from Tonks and Mad-Eye. Since there had been no further progress on the finding of her parents, Hermione decided it would be better if she looked for them herself. She was secretly pleased that she had hidden them so well; it proved she had done at least something right before all had gone to pieces. A few days prior she had sent a letter to the pair with the request to join them in their search. A dispute had followed; no one was keen on the idea of Hermione going so far out while she was still recovering, but Hermione stayed resolute and it was agreed Tonks and Mad-Eye come to the Burrow at the end of the week to take her and Harry with them (for Harry had insisted he go along too).

Their departure was still days away but Hermione had packed already. Her trunk had been returned to her from Hogwarts after the cleanup had ended. It was good to have her own clothes again instead of having to wear the unnecessary lavish gowns she'd been forced to wear at the Manor, or Ginny's clothes, all which were a little too small on her.

Focusing on the strange parcel, Hermione frowned. There was no writing on the outside. No address, no mention of who had sent it. Could it be from Mrs. Weasley? But she was not

at the Burrow. Again, there was the possibility it could be from Tonks and Mad-Eye but there would have been a return address and she had no clue what they could send her that wasn't a note, unless her miniaturized parents had been placed inside this parcel. It couldn't be for Harry, since it was on *her* bed.

Well, the only thing to do was open it. So she picked it up, forgetting about her cardigan.

The second she touched it a shiver ran through her. Hermione paid it no mind, there was a draft coming in from the door behind her, which she had left open so she dismissed it and pulled the brown wrapping paper apart to unearth a small, sturdy little box. It was black and plain, but with a darker ribbon holding it shut. Hermione frowned. What was this? Had Harry done this?

Rather suddenly, her left hand jerked away, the remnants of a stinging pain fading fast. It had come from the ring, she was sure of it. Hermione scowled at it, but then looked farther down and noticed the bleeding paper cut just above her knuckle.

It was more gratifying to think this little injury was the true culprit, so she pressed the back of her hand against the rough fabric of her jeans and rubbed.

To prevent any further accidents she discarded the paper into the waste bin and walked over to the center of the room, holding the strange little box. In a fluid motion she pulled the ribbon off the box and removed the lid. Another wrapped little package lay inside, smaller than her palm. Brown and lumpy, it was folded over with a small square of rough fabric, something a House Elf might wear.

I hope this isn't one of Fred and George's tricks, she thought before taking it out and unwrapping it, holding the piece in one hand and the cloth in the other.

The object that now lay in her palm took her a moment to identify. Were the object its regular colour and still attached to where it belonged she would have recognized it faster but as it was, the little memento was nearly unrecognizable until she gave it a closer look and a split second later she jumped back so violently and the box, the cloth and the little lump fell onto the floor with a small clatter and a mute thud.

Hermione reached to cover her gaping mouth with her hands but remembering what she had just touched, stared at them in shock. No blood stains met her there, but in a fit of panic she flung her hands to her sides, looking at the severed human ear lying on the floor before her.

She pulled out her wand, almost dropped it. It took two tries for her 'Scourgify' to work she was stammering so.

What kind of sick joke is this?

Her gaze caught on the ear again, then traveled to the upturned box, underneath which lay a piece of parchment. She bent down, pushed the box aside, and picked up the note.

With every word she read her dread took root inside her, anchoring her feet to the ground and spreading like wildfire inside her. She was incapable of thought; the fear eclipsed everything inside her. Her hand went slack upon finishing reading its contents but the note refused to slip down to the floor, apparently determined to hold on to her for as long as possible, just like the man who had penned it.

Darling wife, the note read.

Do not think me ignorant as to what you are doing, what you plan to do. You know me better than any other; did you really think you could get rid of me so easily? Sweet little bird, I'm sure you remember what I told you about the spells on that ring. Did you truly think it was me you killed, or did you allow yourself to believe what you so wanted to believe for the sake of comfort? It grieved me to see how improperly you mourn my death, but it makes no matter now.

I know you touched him. I saw it all, ma fleur. You will not do it again. I also know you are looking to find a way to get the spells taken off your ring. It's a pity all the Curse Breakers are 'busy'. Remember my promises, darling. I have always kept them and do not think to stop now. I do not give up what is mine easily.

You called me a monster once. I am willing to prove that is not entirely true. I ran into a friend of yours the other day, returning from America. He is with me now-a little hard of hearing but in good health. If you wish me to be merciful with him and yourself as well as the friends you are with now, you will surrender yourself to me tonight.

I will be waiting outside. Should you fail to appear I will return home and send you more of him, piece by piece and when there is nothing left I will return here and start on the others who so graciously took you in. If you don't want me harming them you will come back to me without breathing a word of this to anyone.

Signed,

Your devoted husband

Hermione remained perfectly still, as if she had locked eyes with a Gorgon and had turned to stone. Even now she could feel his eyes on her, burning into her skin and she shivered, turning round to the window with her wand raised. There was no one there but she cast one protective enchantment after another until she was out of breath, her knees shook so badly she had to hold herself up against the dresser.

The note, which had at last fallen to the floor triumphant, burst into flame and she watched it crumble into cinders, scorching the wood floor before going out.

She saw now how idiotic it had been for her to allow herself to believe he truly had disappeared from her life.

He had never gone, not really. How had he managed it? How? How? She had said the incantation properly, she had seen the green light tear through him, could point out the moment his eyes went glassy with death.

Remember my promises, darling.

There was bile on her tongue. She was finding it hard to breathe. Of course she remembered. She had been trying to forget them since she'd escaped.

Not only that, he also knew about Harry. *How?* Had he been watching? Instantly her arms wrapped around herself, shielding her body with barriers of flesh and bone.

I saw it all...

A hiccup escaped her and Hermione clenched her wand tighter. Oh, he would be so very angry with her. Hermione shuddered.

The worst part was, he had been right, if only just a little.

She had been lying to herself this whole time. But she had desperately needed to believe it, had she not? She had needed to see her friends again-but her family-they still had not been found.

Hermione knew with certainty she would never see them again.

A low, desperate wail lodged itself in her throat but she clamped her lips shut, tried squaring her shoulders.

It was better that way, wasn't it? Hot tears filled her eyes. *Better for them not to remember having a daughter than to live the rest of their lives with the burden of a disappeared daughter weighing heavy on their hearts.*

Hermione cleared away what was left of the note, and discarded the rest of the package. The sight of the ear made her stomach churn-it was lucky she had not eaten anything during breakfast.

So he had found Neville. Worry for her friend gnawed at her and she wondered what damage Draco might have done to him already. Sweet, loyal Neville-her closest friend aside from Ron and Harry and Ginny. Why had Draco wanted him so badly? She remembered the threats he'd made towards Neville and trembled, hoping none had been acted out yet.

But he wouldn't. The note had been Draco's promise. He would spare Neville if she went to him.

That was what she would do. It was the only way. Though she had decided on this already her mind kicked up other ways she might be able to take him down-but the ideas hit a brick wall every time.

There's no way out.

Hermione retrieved the bit of cloth from the bin and wrapped the ear again, tucking it out of sight behind a lamp. There was nothing she could do for it. She would have to bury it later.

She would never see Harry again, nor Ron or any of the others. She would never set foot inside Hogwarts again. She had been branded as a dead woman from the moment Draco first set eyes on her. She would never live again.

There was a low, seductive voice in her mind, telling her to just forget about Neville.

'Forget about your friends and think about yourself for once, Hermione.' Blaise's voice floated back to her, and she frowned. She still had not been able to find him. She prayed he was safe now, wherever he was.

But Neville could not be left to suffer. Hermione had to go back, and she would-she was as sure of this as she was positive she would not let Draco have a complete victory over her.

An idea had resurfaced. An unpleasant, depressing idea that had frightened her so much the first time it had come to her that she had pushed far back into the darker corners of her

mind, but there was a glimmer of hope that it would work, and that was all she had left.

There wasn't much time left. Draco's note boasted patience but she knew well his wrath would grow the longer she took.

Hermione fled in search of Harry.

She chose to do it. She fought through the pain, ignoring it to focus on the pleasure instead. Their hands roamed over each other; lips pressed together feverishly. Just as before, Hermione straddled him, using what she had learned from the love potion to gain her own pleasure now. Underneath her, Harry had thrown his head back, green eyes locked onto hers as they moved together.

The ring burned and throbbed, she strained with the effort to not cry out from the pain of it all. It was a slow, agonizing torture that grew and grew with every passing moment she touched him but he was inside her and that left her bereft of breath at how good it felt. He held onto her and she let him, focusing on moving in just the right way that made her gasp out loud and clench him harder.

Draco would be furious but Hermione didn't care, not anymore. He could punish her all he wanted but Hermione would have this to cling on to; she would give herself this. This would be a memory she would take with her when she walked back into hell; this would give her strength. She was here now with Harry. He loved her and she him; he had asked, not taken this from her and she had said yes. She had made that decision and Draco could never take that away from her.

Harry caught her eye, he gave her an inquisitive look, looking first at her and then down to the mattress, then back up. Hermione hesitated, stilling herself, and then nodded.

The second he settled himself over her Hermione's hands snapped upwards to clench at his shoulders as if to push him away. Harry drew back instantly but Hermione shook her head, taking several seconds to slow her breathing and relax her limbs before pulling him back.

He moved slowly, not wanting to agitate her, and with the sliding whisper of flesh against flesh he settled her underneath him, holding her face between his hands lovingly. Their noses nearly touched, and again he looked her in the eye with a question in his eyes, to which she nodded again, tipping her chin up to kiss him as he pushed inside her again.

Each thrust was gentle and slow, his eyes never wavered from hers, her nose nudged against his cheek each time he pushed forward. A heat rose in her cheeks and spread down to the rest of her, Hermione gripped his sides tight, closed her eyes and groaned deeply, drawing him closer to her, as close as possible. Harry shuddered and began to move faster, but still took care he was not hurting her.

This was love, she thought to herself, blinking back tears as he plunged inside her; deep and slow, deep and slow. Not that farce Draco had made her drink. Unless luck intervened soon, it was likely the last time she would ever experience it. It was getting to be too much, the pain was eating her alive but she looked past it and pretended it was not there, and focused on what felt good. Restless, her legs moved around, fingers pressed deeper into flesh.

With a choked exhalation of breath she felt herself come apart seconds before Harry, and it was then that the pain took her whole.

It was blinding, the pain. So strong she couldn't even move, couldn't speak-everything went black, and she felt her body flare white hot with pain so great she had to clench her teeth to keep from screaming but it was gone in seconds and she took in a great breath of air, and raised herself up on her elbows, blinking hard to get the fuzzy spots out of her vision. Her body was shaking, she wasn't sure if it was from the orgasm or the pain. The ring had grown too hot, Hermione half expected it to melt off her skin but nothing happened. It was obvious Draco knew what had happened but she didn't care.

Harry hadn't noticed. Good. He had grabbed his wand from the bedside table to clean away the mess they'd made before settling back on the bed beside her.

"Did I hurt you?"

"Not once."

They lay in comfortable silence. The whole Burrow was quiet, everyone had gone to sleep hours ago. Harry had cast a *Silencio* around the room to keep their actions private. Hermione curled into Harry's side, letting him wrap an around her, softly nesting in her hair.

He was beginning to fall asleep. Hermione would let him, but first she had something to say.

I love you. Thank you for taking care of me. Forget about me soon and be happy. Tell the others I love them and I'm sorry. I don't want to go...

There was so much she could have said, so much she wanted to say, but there was no time, and Harry was already asleep. His wand lay beside him-Hermione picked it up and performed a simple sleeping charm that would ensure he would not wake before she was gone.

The bed creaked as she stood and pulled a sheet over Harry, up to his waist. He'd fallen asleep with his glasses on; she picked them up and placed them on the bedside table before heading to the loo. When she came back out she headed straight to her trunk. The ring still pulsed angrily on her finger, still hot. She could almost feel Draco's rage emanating from it.

Her hands weren't shaking, she noticed. Funny, she didn't feel all that frightened either. The initial horror the note had inspired in her had fled almost as quickly as it had come.

She had to hurry.

Hermione put on the first things she found in her trunk. It was hot out but she pulled on more layers than necessary. Her wand was left where it was on the dresser-she ran a hand over it sadly. It was better to leave it here. She had no doubt Draco would snap it in half the moment he got a hold of it.

She cast one final look to Harry before leaving the room. The urge to kiss him was almost irresistible but she restrained herself, and wiping at the moisture running down her cheeks, she left the room.

She wished she could have at least said goodbye to everyone else. When Mrs. Weasley had come back home Hermione had embraced her and thanked her for all she had done for her. Hermione had spent some time with Ron, too-they had sat together without saying anything and she had nearly broken down when he hugged her before going to bed. Hermione and Ginny had brushed their teeth together, Ginny giggled when Hermione accidentally got toothpaste in her hair, and Hermione had wanted to say something to her, slip out a subtle *I love you and I'll miss you*, but Ginny would have suspected something was up.

Hermione couldn't quite decide if it was worse to be able to say goodbye or to leave suddenly. Both options were undesirable for her but she had no choice. She had to make a stop to the kitchen before leaving. A note bearing only the words 'thank you' and 'I'm sorry' was left on the table. She regretted the short length of the message, but what else could she say? For their safety she kept it short, but still felt as though she had torn out her own heart and attached it to the little slip of parchment with a knife.

The kitchen was silent and dark. Hermione fancied she could hear the breathing of everyone inside the house if she concentrated hard enough, but there were things to be done so she located the cabinet quickly and moved to it swiftly.

After stepping outside the house, Hermione decided to take some time to cast protective enchantments around the place. Draco had said he would not harm them but she was not going to take any chances. Even if he could get through them at least the occupants inside would have time to flee.

Another thing-she took Neville's ear out of her pocket, wrapped again in the brown cloth, and buried it by some overgrown shrubs.

Even now, as she stood outside, that insidious voice spoke up again.

You don't have to do it, it whispered. Stay and live a happy life with Harry. Marry him. Grow old together.

But then Draco would come after all of us, not just me, she thought, shaking her head. He would kill Neville. And then he might kill me.

The voice continued to whisper but Hermione quelled it as best as she could and began to walk. It was better to end this as quickly as possible. Sure, she felt calm now but she did not know how long it would last. If she stayed any longer she would lose her nerve and go back to Harry.

The air outside was hot and damp. Stars winked above her from between the gaps in the clouds that stretched up in the dark sky. Hermione did not know where to go.

He could be anywhere. He could be following me, or watching me right now.

Making up her mind, Hermione decided to walk straight in one direction, and she did accordingly. She had not gone too far from the home when she felt the ring was pulling her in a certain direction. It wasn't her hand leading her; it was simply the strange compulsion to turn and head in another direction.

She could feel when she was getting closer. Hermione wanted to yell-*enough of this, I'm here*-but it was not in her to yell. The silence of the night pressed in around her, flattening her lungs.

It wasn't much later that she felt the peculiar sensation of walking through a ward, and suddenly Draco stood before her where previously there had been nothing. She stopped at once though the strange force beckoned her to get closer, and Hermione shut her eyes immediately to avoid meeting his eyes. She did not want to know if an expression of smug triumph or fury would meet her.

Her nerve had stayed with her long enough; she felt its absence keenly as her hands and feet turned cold though she herself was sweating through her protective layers.

Feeling him come closer, Hermione flinched away, damning herself for not staying still. His hand tipped her face up, but her eyes remained closed.

Breathing was almost impossible; he was coming even closer. The heat coming from him was incredible; she felt herself scorched by his presence. Then it was his hot breath rushing against her neck, his nose barely grazed against her jaw line as he took deep breaths, inhaling the scent of her skin along the curve of her neck and shoulder. Hermione shivered, but held herself still. When he spoke, his voice came out a growl.

"I can *smell* him on you."

She said nothing. This was her own gift to him. This was her message.

You will never own me. You never did. No one controls me.

Warm, wet, greedy, his tongue tasted her.

"I can *taste* him on you."

Hermione stayed silent.

"You must really want Longbottom to suffer, then," came his light remark, and her eyes flew open. She had not thought about that. Dread coiled inside her, and she spoke at last.

"I am here," she said quietly, fighting the tremors that threatened to overtake her body. "I surrender. Leave Neville out of it."

Their gazes clashed together; earth against ice.

"And?" he prompted coldly.

She bowed her head.

"I am yours," her voice was dull. "You win."

He caught her chin in his firm grip, forcing her eyes to meet his.

"You'll never leave me again."

"Never."

His thumb rubbed along her bottom lip.

“You’ve learnt your lesson well, petit coeur. Though I’m not sure I believe you. After all, you still let him touch you.” He crooked the joint of his thumb, pushing down on her bottom lip, opening her mouth. “You forget you are married to *me*, not him.”

“You forget I was never willing.”

He ignored this. “Did you perchance forget when I told you were never to touch any other? No man, no woman,” he hissed. “I am yours and you are mine *exclusively*.”

With a snap of his fingers she was stripped of her clothing. Hermione instantly covered herself with her hands, not meeting Draco’s eyes, who honed in on her body, taking in every mark Harry had left.

“I hope you enjoyed it,” he said. “By tomorrow the only scent on your skin will be mine.” His eyes lingered on the redness of the tender skin on her chest, which had not yet completely faded from earlier.

“I did enjoy it,” Hermione said scathingly. “I *loved* it. He *asked* for my consent. He didn’t threaten or hit or ignore me when I said no. I loved every second of it.”

Draco glared at her and said nothing for a moment. Hermione knew the danger she had put herself in by saying those words but found she didn’t care.

“Where is your wand?” he asked abruptly.

“I left it inside the house.”

“Good.”

There was a pause as he stared at her shielding her body from his view, struggling to not break down before him.

“There’s no use covering yourself, sweetling,” he said, coming forward to cup her cheek gently in his palm. “I’ve seen all of you so many times already, or have you forgotten? I’ve half a mind to take you right here, but it would be more prudent to wait until we’re back home.”

Hermione twitched at the word ‘home’. He smirked, snapped his fingers once more, and she was fully clothed again. Hermione let her hands drop slowly.

In past instances Draco would hold out his hand to her before they went anywhere. Now, he stepped forward and seized her with one arm and there was a loud Crack, and the next thing Hermione knew she was back inside his bedroom.

She backed away but he followed.

“How did you do it?” she asked. “I killed you. You were *dead*.”

“And here I was beginning to think you would never ask,” he said with a malicious smile.

“*How?*”

“You did kill me,” he said with a twitch in his mouth but there was no sign of amusement in his eyes. “At least, you killed someone who looked exactly like me. The Polyjuice is a handy little potion.”

All the breath left her lungs.

“No...”

“Yes. Did you really think I would be so stupid as to leave your wand where you could grab it?” He sneered. “You should have known better, Hermione. There was your second sign-the first being I never would have wasted time taking you to that hovel. I would have broken your wand the moment I grabbed it from you and Apparated us directly to the manor.”

“Then who—”

“It was your little savior whose life you cut short that day, not mine,” he said with a hint of triumph in his tone, and Hermione felt all the blood drain from her face. “I was all for killing him myself once I found out what he had done, but decided that was no fun. Why kill him directly when I could get you to do it to teach you a lesson? See, I remembered what you told me after I asked if you had enjoyed killing me in your dream. So once I found him I fed him some Polyjuice and a couple of my hairs and none was the wiser. Placed him under the Imperius and had him find you and follow you about until he could get you away without anyone noticing.”

“No-You’re lying!”

“I have the body, sweetheart. I could show it to you if you like, but it wouldn’t really prove anything since he still looks like me.”

“I was waiting right outside to come in the moment you killed him. Right as it happened I was getting ready to enter. I could hardly wait to see the look on your face. I was ready to take you home where you would be safe; I thought killing Blaise was enough punishment for you. Flitwick found and disarmed me before I could come in-I was furious-even more so when I heard you Apparate away.” He laughed. “The little fool thought he could take me. Not all wizards need a wand to cast the killing curse, you know.”

Hermione clutched her stomach. “*Gods...*”

“Running into Longbottom was pure coincidence, really. ‘The cherry on top of the sundae’, as the Americans put it.”

“What did you do to him?” She demanded. “Is he alright?”

“Save for his ear, there isn’t a scratch on him.”

Hermione gave him a mutinous look and he laughed.

“How else was I to get you to come to me willingly, darling bird?”

“Stop calling me that. I hate when you call me that.”

“You also hate when I touch you. Has that stopped me before?”

“Yes,” she snapped. “Or have you forgotten?”

He laughed. “So I have. All the same,” he approached her, and pressed Hermione against the wall with his body. “You are my precious little bird and I am determined to keep you for my own. If I have to break your wings to make sure you never fly away then so be it.”

“You’re frightening me,” she said, trying to push him away.

Draco grabbed her wrists and leaned in for a kiss which she avoided by turning her head.

“Take me to Neville,” she said. “You promised you would let him go if I came to you.”

He said nothing for a moment, then pushed away to walk to the door.

“So I did.”

He did not need to beckon for Hermione to follow him. As fast as her shaking legs would allow, she went after him, who had already left the room and made his way to the living room. When she entered the room he was waiting by the fireplace, his cold eyes glittering as he watched her walk to him.

The tall fireplace was made of white marble. Nothing decorated it; it was plain as the wall behind him. But Draco made a movement she didn’t quite catch, for she was too busy looking around the room for Neville, and the sound of grating rock made her whirl around just in time to see the back of the empty fireplace raise to reveal a passage behind it.

Hermione’s jaw went slack but she clamped her mouth shut and refused to show her amazement. If she had lived here so long and never have known about this, what else could he be hiding in this place?

He nudged her from behind.

“Would you prefer I go first?”

“You’re the one with magic.”

Draco slipped past her, drawing out his wand.

“Follow me, then. Lumos.”

The fireplace was wide enough for both of them to pass through it at once; they bent a little to get through. Hermione thought they would both have to remain stooped over to walk through the rest of the passage but after clearing the fireplace Draco straightened his spine and Hermione followed suit, seeing the passage was as tall as any other in the manse.

“Welcome to the dungeons,” he murmured.

Hermione looked around. The walls were plain and made of stone. Except for the light from Draco’s Lumos they were in complete darkness.

They walked in silence for a bit of a ways; Hermione wanted to preserve the quiet but there were too many questions on her mind.

“Did any other Death Eaters survive the battle?” This was a question she had not thought to ask Harry before.

“A fair amount.”

“They are all in Azkaban then.”

“Perhaps, but not for long.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, but he gave her a warning glance. His words brought another topic of interest to mind.

“You threatened all the Curse Breakers not to touch my case,” she said flatly.

“I have no need for threats with certain types of people, little bird. Gold can be just as effective.”

Of course, she thought.

“Did you know your father is dead?” she asked, curious to see his reaction.

“Yes.”

“How did it happen?”

“One from your silly little band of rebels caught him unaware, apparently. Took me a while to find out who it was but I found him and I cut him down.”

“Who was it?” she asked, fearing the worst.

“That idiot Macmillian.”

“He’s not an idiot.”

“I don’t care.”

Her jaw snapped shut in anger and Hermione said no more.

The light began to reflect off steel bars, illuminating the dungeons a little bit more as they walked past. There were so many cells; it was too dark to tell which one Neville was in. Hermione was worried he was not the only prisoner she would find, but in the end she was proved wrong when they all appeared to be empty, until Draco stopped at one and Hermione saw two forms inside the cell past the murky darkness.

Once the cell had been opened she pushed past an irate Draco and rushed towards the nearest form, which she could not make out until Draco came closer and pointed his wand down at it.

Hermione reeled back. Draco lay there, lifeless. Seeing those cold, dead eyes made her shiver, but she forced aside the repulsion, knowing who truly laid there.

“Oh no, no, no,” she breathed, and stepped closer, kneeling down to hold the stiff, cold hand.

Underneath those cold gray eyes that still held rage and shock inside them, underneath that pale skin and pointed nose was Blaise’s true form somewhere. Hermione’s eyes filled with tears.

“I’m so sorry, Blaise,” she whispered, having forgotten all about the real Draco, who stood beside her, frowning.

Hermione looked up through her tears to glare at Draco. “He was your friend! How could you?”

She could hardly see his cold eyes as he replied, but caught the motion of his indifferent shrug.

“He was until he betrayed me. If he could do it once no doubt he could do it twice. I gave him my trust and he repaid me by stealing my wife.”

“He didn’t steal me,” she hissed scathingly, “He offered me help and I accepted. I left willingly.”

“That won’t bring him back to life, pet.”

He was right. Hermione turned to Draco again.

“Could you at least turn him back to his true form?”

“No. My patience is wearing thin. Go wake your friend.”

Hermione folded Blaise’s arms over his chest, and tried to smooth his angered brow but it was still Draco who stared up at the ceiling in fury.

Had he been aware in his last moments? Had he tried to signal to her that he was not who he appeared to be?

Gods forgive me, she thought, pressing her lips together. *I killed the person who saved me, and all thanks to **him**.*

“Will you bury him?” she asked shakily. He made no answer, and wisely choosing not to pry, Hermione closed his eyes gently with shaking fingers, cast another look of utmost hatred at Draco, and scurried over to Neville, who she could see clearly now in the dim light, slumped in the farthest corner of the cell.

She knelt between his parted thighs, shaking him by the shoulders and tapping his cheeks insistently.

“Neville. Neville? Please wake up.”

He stirred; a breath was drawn through his mouth. He turned to the right and Hermione gasped upon seeing the wound from his severed ear. That it had been sanitized was clear, as it had not festered, but it had not been cleaned entirely. Dried blood trailed down from the small gaping hole to the side of his neck.

She turned to Draco.

“Did you heal him thoroughly?”

“Yes.”

“Clean him,” she demanded. Draco rolled his eyes.

“Hermione?”

She whipped around, taking his face between her hands, taking care not to touch his wound.

“Yes! Yes, Neville, it’s me!” she was so happy she could have laughed. Her eyes scanned over him assessing for damage but none other than the missing ear was found.

"Are you okay?" she asked, but his eyes had widened and suddenly he pulled her to sit beside him, shielding her with one arm across her chest, glaring up at Draco.

"What are you doing with him?" Neville asked, more alert now. "You were free, Hermione! Why are you here with him?"

"Believe it or not, she came back to me willingly, Longbottom."

Neville stared at Hermione incredulously.

"Tell him the truth," Hermione hissed.

Draco grinned. "Of course, I did send her a little incentive to make her agree to come."

"My ear. You sent her my ear."

"Obviously."

Neville lunged to his feet and made a grab for Draco.

"NO!" Hermione screamed, doing her best to pull him back.

"You sadistic bastard!" Neville shouted, but could say no more because he was suddenly sent sailing into the bars behind him with a sickening thud.

Draco looked like he was going to cast another spell. Hermione planted herself directly in front of him.

"Don't you dare hurt him! We have a deal!" Draco gave her a warning look, but lowered his hand, and Hermione rushed back to Neville.

Again she knelt at his side, checking for any injury. "Are you alright?"

"Get out of here, Hermione," he said through ground teeth, rubbing his shoulder. Hermione wiped a smudge of dirt from his cheek, brushing the hair from his sweating forehead as Draco watched jealously.

"The only one leaving this residence is you," came Draco's cold voice.

Neville looked at Hermione, compelling her to explain.

"We made a deal," she said. "If I came back he would let you go."

"Leave me, then," Neville said at once. "Leave me here and go back to the Burrow, Hermione."

"I'm afraid that's not for you to decide," Draco cut in angrily. "The deal has been made. Get up before I take it back and let you rot in here."

Hermione helped him stand. She held on to his arm tightly, watching Draco carefully.

"She's suffered enough because of you!" Neville said to Draco. "Leave her alone!"

"There's been suffering, I won't deny," Draco said with a smirk. "But I won't lie and say she hasn't felt pleasure often, either."

"Shut up!" Hermione shouted. "*Shut up!*"

"I know what you've done to her," Neville said, "And I promise you'll pay for it. Every last thing, Malfoy."

Draco looked bored. "Until that day comes I will look forward to seeing your cold corpse fall to the ground. Now get moving."

He muttered something, and Neville's hands were bound together.

"Just taking precaution," he said at Neville's outraged cry.

They started off on their way out of the dungeons. Hermione began walking with Neville but before they had taken five steps Draco caught hold of her arm and yanked her to his side.

"You're hurting me!" she cried, feeling bold now that Neville was here, if only for a few more minutes. Perhaps once he got back to the Burrow he could tell the others what was happening and send help.

Neville was walking rather slowly. Hermione knew he was doing this intentionally, knew that he too was thinking fast to find a way to help her, and her hope soared.

Draco noticed this too, and crashed Hermione's hopes by saying, "If you don't start walking faster, Longbottom, I'll carry you out myself."

"In a hurry, are you Malfoy?" Neville asked coldly.

"Rather." Draco's arm snaked around Hermione's waist and squeezed. 'I've been looking forward to having sex with my wife all day.' He laughed. "I suppose I owe you thanks for luring her to me."

Hermione tried to push away but he held fast to her. "No you don't, little bird, you made a deal and now you have to keep your end of the bargain."

"I'll kill you, Malfoy."

"So you've said, Longbottom, but you're the one who is bound and defenseless."

Though both Neville and Hermione kept trying to stall, at length they reached the fireplace and stepped through it. Hermione felt her stomach drop, and felt close to tears. Draco let her go to close the passage, and she immediately went to Neville.

"Don't be angry at me, Neville, please don't. I couldn't let you die here," she said, trying to control the waver in her voice. "Tell the others I'm sorry."

"I'll bring them all," he whispered quickly. "We'll find you and we're going to take you back home."

"*This* is her home," Draco snarled. He waved his hand and Neville's binds disappeared.

"Don't think to raise any trouble, Longbottom." To Hermione, he said, "Say goodbye to your *friend*. You won't be seeing him again."

Hermione almost threw herself at Neville, standing on her toes and wrapped her arms around his neck tightly. Neville held her fiercely, crushing her with his arms and Hermione wished he would not let go.

Don't leave me, she wanted to say. Take me with you. I love you. Please, please, please help me.

Instead, she whispered, "Be careful," and kissed his cheek.

"We're going to bring you back, Hermione," Neville breathed into her ear, cupping the back of her head. "I promise."

She nodded, resisting the urge to ask him to hurry.

The moment she pulled back Draco clamped a hand down onto Neville's shoulder and steered him to the door.

'Wait for us,' Neville mouthed to her while Draco wasn't looking. Hermione nodded.

"Where will you take him?" Hermione called after him.

"To that hovel your redheaded friends live in," Draco said, then turned back to face her. "Go to the bedroom and wait for me there," he said in a curt tone to her, and her insides turned to ice.

She wanted to call out something else to Neville but the door slammed behind them, leaving her alone in the silence.

Hermione wrapped her arms around herself, unwilling to make her way to the bedroom.

But she had successfully kept herself intact this far out. She could only hope it would stay that way until the end.

Something inside her told her it wouldn't.

"You're a monster," Neville said to Malfoy as they walked down the front steps of the great house.

"So I've been told."

"Just let her go, Malfoy. You can keep me in the cells until I die as long as she goes free."

"The deal wasn't yours to make, Longbottom."

Neville ground his teeth together.

"Where's my wand?"

"You won't get it until we arrive."

"We? You're coming too?"

"Just to make sure of something." Draco pulled something out of his pocket, wrapped in a piece of cloth. Tapping his wand to it, Draco muttered, "Portus," and the item glowed blue.

"We're taking a Portkey?"

"As you see."

Draco held it out to Neville, who touched his finger to the rusty key just as Draco did, and then everything whirled around him, leaving a trail of colours everywhere and the strange pulling sensation behind his navel seemed to yank him forward. He landed on his feet, and took a moment to clear his head before looking round. Just as promised, the Burrow stood not too far away, darkened by the night.

He turned to face Draco.

"If you touch her again I'll tear you apart," he said, upper lip curling into a sneer.

"Threaten me all you want, Longbottom," Draco said in a calm voice, "I'm still going to fuck her. I'm going to give it to her hard whether she wants it or not. She came back to me willingly to save your sorry arse and now she has to pay the price."

"I'll kill you," Neville breathed, clenching his fists. "She's like a sister to me. You've hurt her so much I can't look at you without thinking up a hundred ways to kill you."

"I encourage you to try," Draco said, smiling, "but you won't get far, I assure you."

Neville tried to lunge at Draco but the blond merely waved his hand and Neville stood frozen where he stood.

"Childish, really," he sneered, drawing out his wand and pointing it at Neville's forehead. "Obliviate."

Hermione nearly jumped out of her own skin when the door to the bedroom opened and Draco stepped through.

He was evidently pleased she had obeyed him, his step was light and quick as he made his way to her, shrugging off his clothing.

Same as before, he pressed her into the wall with his body. Hermione shrank away, shutting her eyes tight, knowing there was no place she could run. His arousal pressed against her and she turned away, shivering as he placed a mocking kiss to her cheek.

"I know you're worried for him but I kept my word, Hermione. He's back with the others by now and I gave him back his wand."

"Thank you," she whispered.

His hands reached down between them and unbuttoned her jeans, pulling down the fly before sliding them down off her hips and down the length of her legs, pulling her underwear along too. Hermione stifled a sob and let him, offering neither help nor resistance as he kicked the garments away, and then began on her cardigan, unbuttoning it slowly before pulling that off, and then her t-shirt and camisole.

This was your choice, a somber voice told her. You gave yourself up.

To save Neville, she thought.

But he can't save you, it replied, and she refused to acknowledge the truth of it.

Draco unhooked her bra, reaching behind her to do it, and tossed it to the side when she was bare before him. Hermione reached to cover herself again, shivering, but he gently pulled her arms away. The glacial tone of his eyes had melted to one of molten lust. Heavy with want, his eyes roamed over her, reacquainting himself with her body.

"I hate you," she said in a trembling voice. "I wish it was really you I killed that day."

Draco shushed her and led her to the bed. Hermione tried pulling away, knowing even that was futile, but he pulled her back and pushed her onto the bed, climbing in after her.

Hermione did not resist when he forced her onto her front and settled himself over her so his chest hovered above her back.

"You won't be able to walk when I'm through with you," he breathed, grabbing her by the hips, pulling her to him. "You won't even be able to crawl, I'd have to carry you everywhere, and don't think I'd take pity on you and leave that gorgeous pussy alone because I won't."

She was shaking so hard, he almost took pity on her. Her body vibrated under his with fear, tense and taut—he had to massage her hamstrings a little before pulling her thighs apart. He crawled between them, waiting for her to clamp them shut before he got too close, but she stayed still, trembling.

Good, he thought.

"I bet Potter was gentle with you," he said. "You don't deserve it. And he doesn't deserve you."

His fingers reached inside her and rubbed her clit, and Hermione pressed her face into the soft sheets, letting the fabric soak up her tears. Her body responded to the stimulus despite her state of mind, she felt the wetness at her core and quickly brought forth the memories of her skin against Harry's, the things they had done only hours ago. Anything to take the focus away from what was happening. He could do whatever he wanted to her but that was something he could never take away from her.

"He doesn't deserve *this*," he said, giving her a sharp pinch. She jerked away but he held her down. "This is only for me, sweetheart, and it's for your own good that you remember that from now on," he said, positioning himself. "I won't suffer an unfaithful wife."

Her skin crawled at his touch, at knowing what was coming next and despite her efforts her body tensed and she cried out into the mattress when he plunged inside her, slammed her palms against the springy surface. Pain grew inside her and she tried twisting away, tried shutting her legs but he was there, immovable and ignorant to her distress.

Draco's eyes fluttered shut, his head rolled back. How he'd missed her. How he'd missed *this*. Truly, she had not been gone for that long but he'd grown so accustomed to their life together, so hungry for this, that he'd felt as though she'd been gone for a lifetime. She pulsed around him, muscles clenching in panic. She was hot enough to scorch, but he felt no pain and continued to thrust, ignoring her heartbroken wails.

"I'm going to fuck you until you *scream*," he moaned, drawing out before slamming back in. Her body was still resisting him but not as much as before, though she had gone slack she was still tense and tight around him and he had to push harder to envelope himself inside her waning heat, savage in his actions. Her eyes shut and she expelled a harsh breath but said

nothing as he started to pound. Desperately she tried to imagine herself somewhere else, tried to remember what Harry's hands had felt like rather than Draco's claws. Those hands groped at her backside and then braced themselves on the bed on either side of her body as he settle atop her, his chest pressing into her back. Hermione bit back a scream as he bit into her shoulder, fearing another mark, but it died in her throat when he released her quickly after. Her skin was inflamed and bore the mark of his teeth, but beheld no injury.

"What would Potter say if he could see you now?" he asked slyly. "Being fucked face down like a dirty little whore. What would he say if he could see how *wet* you are, how your delicious little body is just begging to be fucked by me?"

"I'm not," she pleaded through her tears. "Just *stop*!"

He pushed in, harder and she muffled her cry into the blanket beneath her, pressing her palms over her mouth to staunch the outpour of pain and sadness as he renewed his claim on her. He was going about it slowly, grinding his hips against her bottom, one hand on her hip and the other reached forward, grabbing her just underneath the jaw, and forcing her up a little to press against his front. Her back arched because of this and her bottom pressed against him, he was drawn deeper inside her and he groaned hoarsely, digging his fingers into her flesh. His whole body was strung tight, his hands kept clenching into fists and his nerves sang, just by being inside her. His hips began to jerk against hers, hard enough to leave her without breath.

"How did it feel to kill me, my love? I bet you enjoyed it, but I don't think Blaise did."

She sobbed aloud; the guilt felt like it would eat her alive if Draco didn't do it first.

It was agonizing, the pace he was going at. Hermione tried her best to distance herself from what was happening but it wasn't working this time; every time he forced himself back inside her she remembered what-*who*-she had given up.

Suddenly his weight on her disappeared, the intrusion was pulled from her body, but before Hermione could even think to sigh in relief he was turning her over onto her back with his strong hands. Her arms he pinned down with one hand; the other was heavy, pressing on her stomach as his mouth sealed over her nipple. It hurt to move her legs, so he had an easy time of it holding them apart again. She met his eyes briefly and looked away, frightened of his consuming gaze.

He was using teeth-Hermione winced at the uncomfortable sensations he brought down on her sensitive skin. He sucked hard on her breast, giving sharp bites every now and then that made her jerk underneath him. She had to bite her lips to keep from whimpering in pain.

When he released her from his mouth her skin burned an angry, mistreated red. He was pumping inside her again, rougher than before. The soft flesh of her breasts moved with every push, every forceful thrust, and Hermione turned her head away from his cruel gaze as his voracious mouth attacked her other breast, and then her neck.

Draco made good on his promise. By the time he finished with her she was extremely sore all over, and half dead with exhaustion. Her one act of rebellion had been keeping the screams he desired from him. That had worked until the end, when he'd used magic to hold her down and used his mouth on her, working relentlessly to bring her to an orgasm she desperately did not want. That was when she started to struggle against him but the binds held her down and

his tongue continued lavishing unwanted attentions on her. When he'd been satiated enough he'd spent himself to the last of his energy to make her come again. And again. And when he'd finished he'd kissed her, making her taste her own self. . She was tender, burning with pain but his hand took the place of his tongue and she screamed at last when he wrenched that final wave of pleasure out of her, too weak to hold it back. At the end of it all, despite the pains that gripped her all she could feel was a strange, maddening sort of numbness.

"You're mine;" he'd said into her lips, her breasts, into her lower body. "Mine, always."

Not satisfied with her pained silence, he made her repeat it, over and over.

"I'm yours," she had whispered. "Yours." And he had devoured her sad mouth afterwards.

Draco had fallen asleep shortly after, drawing her into his chest with his arms. Hermione resisted but he was too strong, and she was too tired to move anyway. The entirety of her throbbed and burned with pain-the fresh bite on her shoulder bled tiny rivulets of blood that stained his sheets, the tears had dried uncomfortably on her face, his words echoed unwelcome through her mind but she ignored it all. There were only three things that gave her comfort, the first being that her friends were safe, and the second was that Draco had used a Contraceptive Charm (she had been terrified he wouldn't). The last was that he had fallen asleep. Everything had fallen into place and it was time to act before it was too late.

A/N:

One chapter to go. Reviews are extremely appreciated.

I also completely forgot when writing this story about including the Deathly Hallows and the Elder Wand. It's been mentioned in one or two reviews and each time I feel like such a dolt for having forgot something so crucial to the books. But, as I'm sure we are all aware, this fic hasn't followed canon very faithfully. I might or might not add something in (about the Elder wand, anyway).

Also it's not written in there but yes Harry and Hermione used a Contraceptive Charm.

Regards,

Charlotte

39. End

Boo.

Harry Potter and company do not belong to me, rights go to JK Rowling.

Chapter Forty: End

“Yeah, you know only how to own me

You know only how to own me

You’re buying stars to shut out the light

We come alone and alone we die

And no matter how hard you try

I’ll always belong in the sky.”

Buy the Stars-Marina and the Diamonds

0-0-0-0-0

“Don’t you fret, my dear

It’ll all be over soon

I’ll be waiting here for you

Run fast as you can

No one has to understand

Fly high across the sky from here to kingdom come

Fall back down to where you’re from

Don’t you fret, my dear”

Kingdom Come-The Civil Wars

The air outside was cold; the bleak sky was a pale grey, mottled with clouds. From where Hermione stood she could see the gardens and the surrounding lands perfectly; the green shrubbery thrashed wildly about in the wind and the flowers swayed, turning into bright blurs of colour that stood out against the green. The stalks of lavender waved at her from their field, almost beckoning her to join them. Hermione sighed softly, thinking back to the events of the day.

She had been startled awake when a new House Elf came into the room with fresh garments for both her and Draco. Hermione had looked for her own clothing she had worn the night before but they were gone, likely sneaked away when she had not noticed by the Elf to be laundered or destroyed. The Elf had gone without another word or glance at Hermione,

who felt a little hurt until she remembered Bogg, whom she had not seen at all since her return. She did not need to ask Draco what had happened to the poor Elf. No wonder this new creature would not even look at her-he didn't want to be killed because of her.

It had taken longer than anticipated to extract herself from his Draco's hold. He slept calmly without remorse for what he had done. In his view, it was all justified because now he had her and she would not leave him again. The thought made Hermione seethe, but only for a moment. She was wasting time, she had to move. So she began the task of getting out of the bed, which proved to be a challenge. Just when she at last managed to pull out of his firm grip he would pull her back again, and she would be back at square one. It had only happened twice but she had done the job slowly with a racing heart. The last time, his arms went out to grab her again but she pulled away in quickly, almost rolling herself off the bed in her haste. When she got back up, he was still asleep, but had rolled over onto his back.

Now he lay on the large bed; fast asleep, and alone. This was what she had been waiting for.

Hermione had been obliged to wear the dress. Her own regular clothing suited her present task much better, but they were not to be found so it was the dress or nothing, and she would not do it naked. Ignoring the pain and soreness felt all over her body, Hermione made her way upstairs as stealthily as she could.

There was no time to lose. Her plan was extremely faulty and could backfire at any moment, but it was all she had-it was her last chance and she would take it, never mind the consequences if it didn't work. She would at least try, or spend the rest of her life (however long that might be) hating herself for squandering a golden opportunity.

She was winded halfway up the third flight of stairs, but paused only for a few seconds to regain breath before sprinting up again. Her whole body hurt and once or twice she almost fell but caught herself in time to keep moving at the same pace as before. Hermione tried to be as quiet as possible; she breathed in through her nose and took quick, light steps.

Before leaving the Burrow Hermione had gone through Mrs. Weasley's Potions+Medicines cabinet for something, *anything* that might help her. Sadly, Mrs. Weasley was not in the possession of any poisons, of which Hermione had directly searched for. Everything else was mostly tonics for colds and relief potions for bodily aches, and the sleep potions Hermione took each night.

Hermione took one of these small bottles and rushed into the loo to think. There was no way she could smuggle them with her-Draco would find and discard them. Briefly, she entertained the notion of holding a little in her mouth until he kissed her but there was no way that would work either so she shoved that idea aside. She thought frantically, trying on one idea after the other until she was left with only one. Even this one was not quite likely to work but it was better than the others so she acted upon it.

It felt absurd at first but she knew unless she was extremely lucky he would touch her that night. There was no way she could prevent it-she would go to him to save Neville, and it was the only way her plan could work. But this did not mean she was willing. It was only because she had to, and because she could see no other way. To her frustration, however, she needed her wand, so she had to slip back into the bedroom where Harry still slept to retrieve it and ducked back into the loo.

Making sure to lock the door first, Hermione stripped off all her clothing before opening the bottle, dipped her finger inside, and began to dab it on her skin like it was a perfume. First she had cast a modified Impervius charm so her skin would not absorb it. She did not want to fall asleep before she was sure Neville was safe. On her neck, shoulders, breasts, between her thighs-anywhere he might put his mouth. The thought almost made her ill but she kept going until she finished. Once dry she pulled her clothing back on, fighting her trembling fingers and left the room. Everyone was still asleep; no one had moved. Hermione returned her wand and left through the back door.

Through her confrontation and meeting with Neville, Hermione had been afraid her plan would not work, that her clothes were rubbing the potion off her body and there would be nothing left when it was time. She worried Draco would find out about it, that he would punish her for it or even worse, that the potion would have no effect now that it was dry.

But the time came and he hurt her. Hermione had been holding back such turbulent emotions until then she could not help it when they burst out of her. It was another panic attack, she realized dimly once he began, but he didn't know that. She didn't think he cared either. He simply thought she was in pain, that she was venting her grief. Well, she had done that too, but only after the panic attack had gone, and that had taken a long time. By then she had almost given up hope, which already was hanging by a thread. His mouth had already ravished the areas she had applied the potion and nothing was happening; she had to remind herself over and over that it was a small quantity and even if it worked it would take time to do so.

So Hermione waited, trying not to let herself fall apart while he hurt her over and over and his mouth tasted her. She did notice as it happened, that by the end his movements had slowed down some. His eyes were tired and glazed as he released her hair from his fist and pulled out of her. Hermione cringed at feeling the remnants of his assault run thickly down her legs, and she collapsed, shaking, onto her stomach just as he grabbed her and pulled her to him, to her dismay. Against her better judgment, she had let herself fall asleep, but now that she looked on it she was glad she had allowed herself to rest for just a tiny while. Had she gone once Draco had released her she would not have been able to get up the first flight of stairs without collapsing of exhaustion.

But she had made it to the top floor at last, red in the face and still short of breath but she made it.

It hadn't occurred to her until she came up to the doors that led to the balcony that they might be locked. She tried the handles, and they were. There was no lock on the handles either, she supposed they were charmed to let only Draco open them.

The rage and desperation that filled her then were almost blinding. Together, the emotions seized her and shook her violently, clenching her jaw tight to keep inside the scream of hatred that if let out, would have her discovered and punished.

To have come so far to be thwarted again! It was too much to be borne.

She slid down to her knees, pounding her fists against the doors wildly.

It wasn't fair! It wasn't!

She would spend her life trapped with that vile, wretched monster. Never again would she see her friends or family, never again would her family even remember her, she would certainly never finish her schooling. What was there left for her? Rape. Hate. Misery. A man who saw her as a possession, something to be conquered. She was all but stripped of her power here.

No, there's nothing left for me, she thought, and the sadness grew, mingling with the rage. Her head and shoulders dropped low and her fists, lying reddened and raw in her lap, loosened.

She sniffled. As if in prayer, her hands rose with her palms open, and pressed flat against the door, which gave way and opened at her touch.

Hermione looked up quickly, astonished. Before standing she looked around to make sure Draco was not there with her, that it was not a cruel joke. But there was no one.

Could she have done it by accident? She raised her hand and stared at the ring. It gleamed innocently up at her. Hermione would have liked to know exactly how this had come to pass but a miracle had been granted her, apparently, and she would not let it go to waste. She wasn't sure how much time she had left. She hurried past the doors and onto the balcony.

The strong wind howled, whipping around her in gusts. Below, everything green rustled loudly.

Shaking, she raised herself onto the ledge, the toes of her cold, bare feet sticking out over into the air. Gooseflesh rose on her skin, again and again, making her shudder. The brisk air nipped at her skin, whisking her curls around forcefully. The skirt of her dress fluttered around her in a frenzy as though pleading for her not to follow through with what was on her mind.

"It's the only way," she whispered to herself.

And it was.

Images of Harry, Ron, Neville and Ginny flashed through her mind. Memories of visiting the Burrow and their adventures at Hogwarts, her life with her parents played before her eyes and she let out a quiet sigh. The war was over and Voldemort was dead but nothing in her situation would improve. No one would ever be able to find her. Malfoy had taken her freedom-she couldn't fight back at all.

Except...

This was the only way. She wondered at how she was able to get this far in defying him-perhaps he had not thought her capable of going to such lengths? It must have been true. Several months ago she herself never would have dreamed of doing this. She was Hermione Granger, the brightest witch of her age. She always found a way out.

Hermione took care to not look down. She had promised Neville she would wait, but how long would that take? A day, three weeks, a year? However long, she wasn't sure she could wait until then. She had been through enough, and wasn't sure she could go through more. She had only agreed to please him. Even then she had known she would find her way up here one way or another.

There was no help coming. It was a hard pill to swallow, but Hermione was positive there was no way Draco would have let Neville walk free just like that. He knew too much about a man who was supposed to be rotting in a grave. Most likely he had Obliviated her friend to make sure all this stayed a secret.

Hermione looked behind herself, making certain she was alone.

She had to move-Draco would not remain asleep forever.

But she didn't really want to do it. Her legs shook quite badly and she repeatedly felt her whole mind and body scream at her to step back down and not jump.

But it was the only way.

It was either this or to live the rest of her life in captivity with a man who was steadily losing his mind, if he hadn't completely lost it already. He had taken so much from her; she figured this was the only way to cause him pain, to get away from him permanently.

Take away the only thing he cares about, she whispered.

Hermione found herself wondering what Draco's reaction would be when he found her. The thought of his perfect face twisted with rage and grief made her want to laugh. He'd severely underestimated her, thinking himself so clever with that ring. Did he really think she would just give in? He was a fool if he thought she would actually surrender. It had taken her some time to get to this point, to be sure, but this was what it had come to and she would do it. He could choose what she wore, ate, he could think he owned her, but in the end it was only she who had control of her life, and she was determined to keep it that way.

Draco had stolen her control. She would steal it back.

Hermione's foot slipped and she lost her balance, flailing her arms wildly to steady herself. It took a second or two but she managed it at last and stayed perfectly still, sucking in air. She had always had a fear of heights. When she was a girl her parents had taken her to Paris over the summer for her tenth birthday. They had visited the Eiffel Tower and had ventured as far up as the second level. She had been all excitement and curiosity until she had got out of the lift and had run to the edge to see the view. All it took was one look and she was reeling; clutching an iron beam for support as she staggered. Her parents had rushed to her, concerned, her father had picked her up and carried her away from the imposing view as she trembled, hiding her face into his shoulder. And now standing there she felt as though she was that little girl again.

Only this time there was no one there to comfort her even though she wasn't shying away from the terrifying view. Part of her embraced it while the other half was shouting in her mind, begging her to step back and find some other way to free herself.

"It's the only way, it's the only way, it's the only way," she repeated to herself.

Still, she couldn't help but release a few bitter tears. All her life she had known she was special. Not as special as Harry, of course, he was far more important than she, but she had always dreamt she would do something great with her life. Fight in the war alongside Harry and help defeat Voldemort, bring peace to the wizarding world and who knew what would have come after? She would have got herself a good, rewarding job in medicine or potion making, perhaps something in the ministry? Something in which she could have used her

famous brains. But then Malfoy had come along and now she was nothing more than a trophy wife. A sex slave, a mere plaything for him to take advantage of. She couldn't say no, she couldn't fight him; he had gone to great measures to ensure that. In kidnapping and marrying her he had taken her freedom and ultimately, her life, for since the moment he had slipped that ring on her finger her life was in his hands.

But not anymore.

She could try to endure but in the end, to what would it lead? She could be here for the rest of her life unless he one day grew bored of her and killed her, and from what he had told her she didn't see that happening. There was no Blaise this time, no third party that could help her. Lucius and Narcissa were dead, and Neville, even if he was somehow able to rally the others; he didn't know where the Manor was located anyway. Hermione didn't want to die but she didn't want to live in this manner anymore. Both options were extremely unappealing but in the end she preferred death, even if it frightened her. In death she would be free.

She looked down, swaying slightly as the vertigo hit her.

One step is all it takes...

The winds picked up. Hermione let out a shaky sigh and closed her eyes. Strands of her hair whipped across her eyes in the wind, as though shielding her from the terrifying view should she open them again. A melody began to play in her mind and she hummed along softly until she reached the chorus and she began to sing.

"No enemy to call my own,

No porch light on to pull me home,

And where I stood was beautiful

Because I was free—"

By the last word her voice came out as a broken whisper. Hermione straightened her posture and spread her arms out by her sides. Shaking, she leaned forward and the rest of her followed, hurtling down, down, down. The last thing she felt before her world went dark was the wind blowing past her face as an horrible anguished cry tore through the air.

Following Hermione's disappearance, the Burrow was in a state of silence. The note she had left at the table shocked them all; they spent hours wondering what could have prompted her to leave so suddenly in such a fashion. An even bigger surprise was presented to them when they discovered her wand had been left all wondered why. Harry was beside himself with worry, thinking she had gone to hide in the Muggle world.

There was no reason, none at all, they all thought, for her to run away. She had been safe with them, recovering from her ordeal.

Mad-Eye and Tonks arrived, unaware of what had occurred, and had been filled in promptly. Mad-Eye inspected her room and the kitchen with his eye, Tonks questioned them all if anything strange had happened the night before she had left. Nothing was deemed suspicious, for no one had seen the mysterious package that had arrived for her, which was

gone. There was a debate on whether the search for the Grangers should be continued or not. Harry argued they were better off the way they were now. It was better, he said, to find Hermione first.

Later on that day, Neville arrived, to their surprise. Harry and Ron immediately sensed something was off, and were proved right when upon their asking him where he had been for the past several days; he confessed he had no idea. His memory of that time was a curious blank.

All he knew, he said, was that after coming back from America he had gone home. He could remember putting a kettle to boil and taking off his coat, but after that there was nothing.

This unsettled them all greatly. How had Neville come to disappear as well and suddenly come to by the Burrow? Not only that-everyone wanted to know how he had come to have only one ear? Who had cut it off? Had he done it himself? Had he been tortured, and by whom? Most importantly, why?

Poor Neville! If only he could remember, he was the one who wanted the answers to these questions the most. He explained to them how he had come to and the first thing he saw was the Burrow. Even he hadn't known he was short one ear until they gave him a hand mirror, and he saw for himself the strange little hole where his ear had once resided. It shook him up a little but Neville, being an opportunist, decided that if he could still hear and if he still had the other ear, he would be alright.

Once that confusion was over, Harry asked if he had seen or heard anything of Hermione. Neville was shocked to hear she had run away, and became just as worried as Harry, who feared there was foul play involved.

There was a disquiet growing inside Harry by the minute. It just didn't seem right that Hermione leave that way, which was not something she would do, especially as abruptly as that.

What did she mean by leaving her wand behind? And why? With everything she had gone through one would think she would make sure to be armed at all times, especially if she was running away. The cryptic note she had left behind bothered him as well. Unless she disliked someone, she was not the sort of person to speak through notes as curt as that.

No, Harry was convinced there was someone else involved. The only problem was that the person he had in mind was supposed to be dead.

But there was no body found, remember? A voice piped up in his head.

This was something else that bothered him. Despite the suggestion that someone else happened across the body had been mutually agreed upon, Harry did not believe it at all. It was just a hunch, really; a piece of doubt inside him that grew each day. Others would have brushed it away as paranoia and grief fogging his mind but Harry knew better. This feeling had saved him too many times to count; he would not stop listening to it just because the others wouldn't believe him.

So he had got Neville alone with him and Ron, and asked him more questions. Did he think his home had been broken into? Did he hear or see anything before he had blacked out?

Did he think he had been kidnapped? Did he think Malfoy was behind this?

Neville answered no to every question, but something curious happened.

To the last query he said, "No. He's dead, isn't he?"

Harry had been watching intently, and caught the way Neville's lip curled in contempt, the way his fists clenched slightly and his shoulder twitched up to where his ear was missing. It was a quick, fleeting reaction. Even Neville had not noticed it until Harry and Ron pointed it out.

This was all Harry needed to confirm his suspicion. Malfoy had got a hold of Hermione again. He must have been the one to kidnap Neville. Somehow he must have made her aware of the fact Neville was his hostage to make her go to him.

"That's got to be it!" he decided, pacing rapidly from one end of the room to the other. "Malfoy probably made her leave her wand behind—since the ring prohibits her from using magic in the first place, she wouldn't be able to use it there."

"There's one thing I don't understand," Ron interjected. "If the ring doesn't let her use magic then how was she able to use it when she was with us?"

"Hermione told me that since Blaise was the one who gave her wand back. He gave her permission to use magic. He was her protector and the ring allowed it so I imagine that's how it works."

"But why would Malfoy have kidnapped me?" Neville asked. "Wouldn't he have gone after one of you, or both?"

"We've been here all this time," Ron said. "I guess it would have been too risky for him to come and try to take her just like that, or take one of us as hostage. Reckon you were the easier target, since you were alone and all."

Harry nodded.

"One last question, Neville; Can you remember anything about where you were?"

Neville shut his eyes, thinking for a moment.

"Sorry, mate. Nothing. I only remember waking up here." He rummaged in his pocket for a moment. "I forgot—I did find this."

He held a rusty old key in his palm.

"It was lying on the ground near me when I woke up. I brought it with me since I figured it might be important."

"Neville, you're brilliant," Harry said, grabbing the key carefully. He turned to Ron. "D'you think we can get Bill to take a look at it? Maybe he can help us find out if it was used as a Portkey."

"Bill's still in Venice on some case for Gringotts but I'll write him and get him to come," Ron said, and left quickly in search of some parchment and a quill.

"I've got a bad feeling about this, Harry," Neville said.

“We all do,” Harry replied.

“Not just that,” Neville shook his head. “Don’t you feel like it all ended too easily? Voldemort hardly put up a fight when you tried to kill him again. It’s almost like...”

“Like what?”

Neville shrugged. “Like he wanted it to happen. He was smiling when he died. Like he knew something we didn’t.”

Harry sat down on his cot.

Harry thought he had been the only one to notice the mad, knowing grin that had flashed onto the dark wizard’s face the second the curse had hit him. It was unsettling and haunting; Harry had been glad to see Voldemort fall to the ground at last.

The war was over, Voldemort was gone and his followers imprisoned. Still, Harry couldn’t quite shake the feeling that the dark wizard had been one step ahead of him all this time. There was something coming. Had no one noticed how none of the captured Death Eaters had put up a fight? Not one had fled the battle, not one of them tried to run or plea innocence. They all went without complaint to the terrible prison.

They’re waiting for something, he realized.

No, not something. A face flashed through his mind’s eyes. Cold eyes, pale hair.

Someone.

Harry sighed, and ran a hand through his hair.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “I worry about that, too.”

Thanks for reading.

More to come. One-shot will be published in November, please stay tuned.